

Fushi no Kami

REBUILDING CIVILIZATION

STARTS WITH A VILLAGE



2

Mizuumi Amakawa

Illustrator:

Mai Okuma

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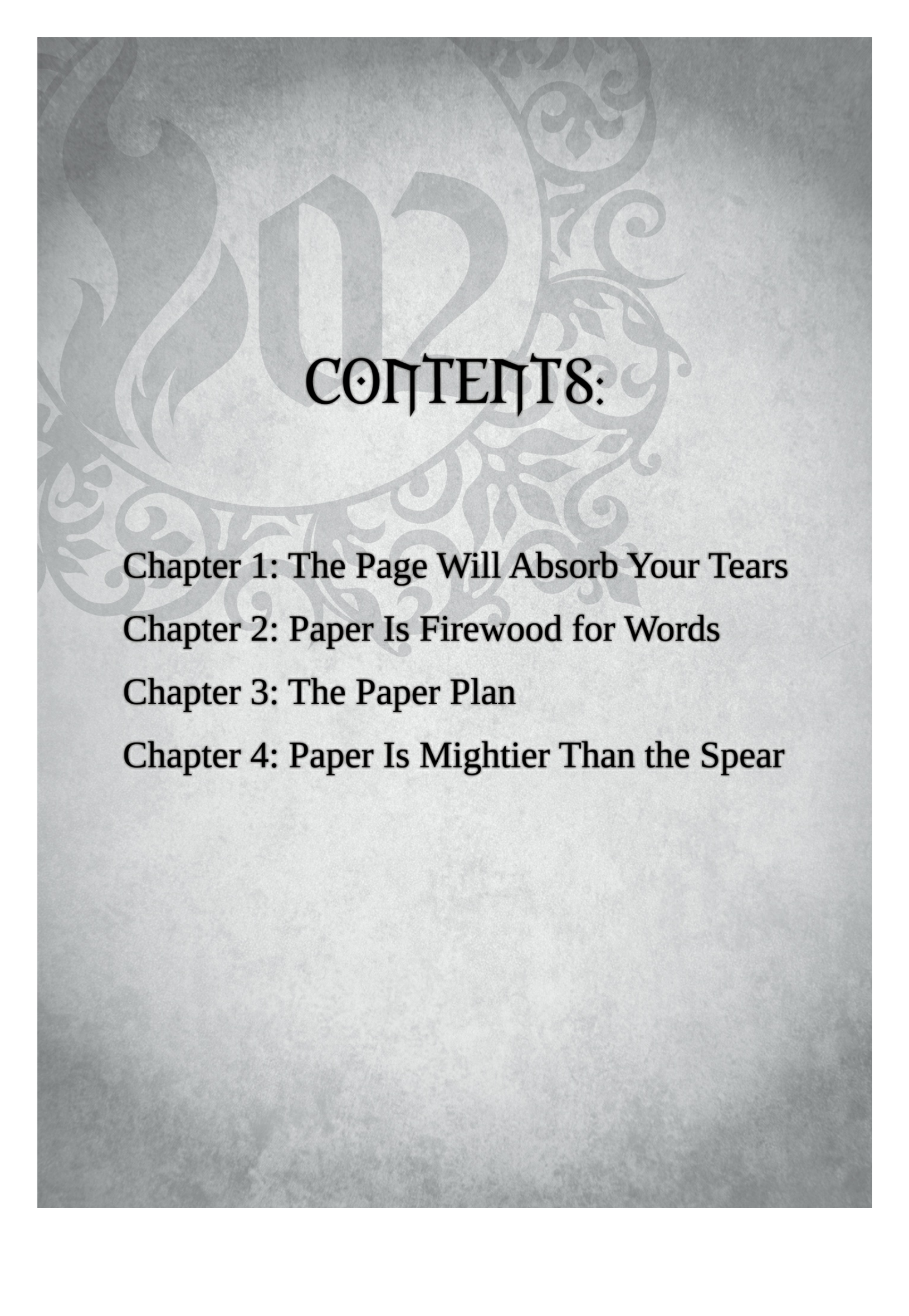
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CONTENTS:

Chapter 1: The Page Will Absorb Your Tears

Chapter 2: Paper Is Firewood for Words

Chapter 3: The Paper Plan

Chapter 4: Paper Is Mightier Than the Spear

Chapter 1: The Page Will Absorb Your Tears

Finally, I, Ash, had arrived in the big city!

After having done so many things in the farm village, the village chief had praised me—or at least I took it as praise—saying, “Ash, you’ve already done so many amazing things. I wonder what you’ll achieve once you go to study in the city.”

My first impression of the city from a distance could have been summed up with the words “stone walls”—that was all you could see from the outside. Combined with its location on a hill, the city seemed to be well-protected. Indeed, it was a place in need of high-defense capacities. Just looking at those walls almost made me fall down a spiral of anxiety. Thankfully, the city was also the birthplace of my great benefactor, Mrs. Yuika, so I could more or less view it with a different perspective.

Right away, I noticed that the walls had several crooked parts, which I assumed to be hastily-executed emergency repairs after battle damage. This was alarming. I sensed that the inside of the city was much further away from the cultural standards of my past life—or even that of this world’s ancient civilization—than I had expected. Once I took care of the village, this city was going to fulfill the extremely important role of becoming my next base of operations in my quest to achieve a cultural revival, so I was worried about its condition.

You could say that the city was like a nest where I was going to incubate my dreams. First and foremost, there needed to be enough food in the surroundings of the nest. This was necessary before laying the eggs, while taking care of them, and after they had hatched. The nest itself required superior building materials and construction techniques to avoid the tragedy of it falling down. In my case, this meant all sorts of raw materials and technology. And last but not least, threats from outside enemies were of course a big problem for the nest. We had to be prepared to repel any predator eyeing the

eggs, and depending on the situation, we would need appropriate defensive structures as well as enough food and raw materials to hold out.

So, does this city currently fulfill these requirements? I'm afraid not.

Firstly, applying the average amount of food produced per capita at Noscula village, where I was born and raised, to the population of this city, there was no way that would adequately feed 50,000 people. *First strike.*

Secondly, considering that the stone wall had only undergone emergency repairs, it could be assumed that there was a lack of either raw materials or adequate technology, or maybe even both. That was seriously concerning, since this city also acted as a military base, which meant that it received preferential treatment in terms of budget and latest technology. I was a bit scared to learn about the actual conditions. *Second strike.*

Lastly, on top of the defensive structures themselves being inadequate, it appeared that the only weapons atop the stone walls were ballistae. There were no traces of any chemical weapons. I could not see any gunpowder or muzzleloaders. The defensive system relied entirely on physical strength, and thus was unreliable. *Third strike and out. Good game. Thank you for playing.*

Regardless, I was not going to give up, so it was not game over yet. I was determined to continue until I would win. The odds were stacked against me, but I was aware of that since my time in the village. If I could be stopped by that little bit of despair, I would not have come this far. I just had to do it myself! I needed to increase food and resource production, as well as improve technology and defensive structures until they met the standards necessary to hatch my dreams!

Leave it to my guts and fighting spirit to change this city with a bang! Surely I can do it! Maybe... Well, it might be a bit difficult... Just a bit. Even if my passion was burning as bright as the sun, it was hard to channel that energy with a single human body as an output device. So, what could I do?

I gave a fiery look to Lady Maika, who was standing next to me gazing at the city.

“Uhm... W-What is it, Ash?” She smiled and fixed her hair after noticing me.

It looked like the first lady of our village was embarrassed by the appearance of her hair, which was all messed up from the wind. This was a stark contrast to the girl who used to love playing in the dirt back in the village. She was making an effort to appear more ladylike.

“I am looking forward to continuing to work with you,” I said.

“To continuing to work with me?”

Yeah, I’m still counting on you. I could most definitely use the help of someone with such a promising future as you in order to achieve my ambitious dreams. Of course, there’s something in it for you too—I’ll reward you with a happier and more prosperous life.

As I smiled at her with these thoughts in mind, she nodded in agreement with a bright-red face. “O-Of course! You can always count on me!” she said flusteredly.

That was the kind of enthusiasm I expected! I needed more helpers like her. If on my own I was limited, I just needed to rely on others. Rather than remodeling myself to have 100 arms, it was much easier to recruit the help of 50 other people. According to Mrs. Yuika, many talented people lived in the city. All the children who came to the city like Lady Maika appeared to be from influential families in the countryside. In that case, this was the perfect place to recruit and strategize with collaborators.

Hehehe! Just wait and see, city which doesn’t seem to live up to my expectations! Together with Lady Maika, I’ll change you into a place fit for my dreams!

First, I needed to take care of food production. More food equaled more people, which in turn increased the potential for talented human resources whom I could drag in as collaborators. It was the perfect plan to turn this city into a safe and comfortable haven to live in.

As my flames of ambition were burning, a strong wind started blowing. Poor Lady Maika kept trying to fix her hair, but to no avail.

“My hair’s a mess!”

“The season of strong winds is almost over, but today it is still quite strong.”

From fall until winter, this kind of wind was common in this region. If only I could become a wind shield for Lady Maika... But unfortunately, she was taller than me; a body of my height could not really prevent any winds from messing her hair.

At that moment, Mr. Quid, who had promised to take us to the city, came to our rescue with his covered wagon.

"I finally caught up to you two," he said. "Please stop going ahead by yourselves. After all, it's part of my job to make sure you're safe."

"Ah, Quid. You have come at the right time. We are sorry for making you worry." While apologizing, I took Lady Maika's hand and guided her into the wagon. *Much better already, isn't it?* "The horse carriage is indeed a good cover. Let us use Quid as a wind shield until we reach the city."

"T-Thanks, Ash!"

It's the least I can do as a gentleman.

It seemed that Mr. Quid wanted to say something. "I mean, I want to keep you safe, but I didn't expect you to treat me as a cover."

"The wind is strong after all."

"But it is also a sign of good luck," he remarked. "It gives you a push when starting something new. The same wind was blowing when I changed my job to become a merchant."

Oh, did I hear that correctly? It seemed that a lot of people started on a new path in the season between fall harvest and winter, the leisure season for farmers. People who came to make some extra money in the city, away from their home in the farm village; people who decided to change careers after obtaining some funds from the harvest; and people with development plans who had a surplus of produce and manpower.

If people who had succeeded in their ventures said that "The wind blew me into the direction of success," it was no wonder that it had become a sign of good luck. There must have been just as many—if not more—stories of people who failed, but they usually stayed quiet. In other words, if you had fully developed wings, the wind would help you soar through the skies, but if your

wings were still underdeveloped, it would just blow you off in a random direction.

Interesting. So, I'm guessing this wind is currently testing me to see whether my wings are the real deal or not. Very well, I accept the challenge!

"What's wrong with Ash? He seems to have drifted off. Do you know what happened, Maika?"

"Oh, that's just what he's like when he gets fired up. I'm not really sure why he does that or what to do to bring him back."

"Hm, I see..."

"But don't worry! He's invincible once he's in this state!"

"Oh!"

And off we went to the still-disappointing city, which I was eventually going to turn into a place of my liking.

As expected, the inside was utterly disheartening. After passing through the gate, all I could see were wooden, single-story buildings. I was in shock. The houses were mostly likely single-story because of the stove, which acted both as a heating and cooking facility. They were constructed out of clay, so I could not imagine any scenario where such an open fire installation inside a wooden, two-storied house did not lead to a fire. Besides, two-story buildings would have been more difficult to keep clean. As a result, they were extremely rare both in the countryside and in the city.

To be honest, I was a little surprised at first, since I had hoped to see a slightly more developed cityscape. If by any chance a fire broke out, it could easily end up destroying the whole city. Aside from the manor we presently found ourselves in, I had only seen three or four other buildings made of stone. Was there a lack of stone materials?

"I am sure there is a valid reason. Anyhow, my stay here already promises to be interesting."

After observing the parlor for a while, I sat down again next to a stiff Lady

Maika, who awkwardly giggled. “You’re something else, Ash. Even in a situation like this, you don’t seem nervous.”

She had a point. In a situation like this, where I found myself in a luxurious room as I had never seen in this world, and where I was about to meet an influential person, it would have only been natural to be nervous. However, I was used to this much due to my past-life memories.

On the other hand, though, Lady Maika looked like she was about to turn into stone. I tried to ease up her tension a bit.

“There is nothing to be afraid of. After all, the person we are about to meet is your relative, right?”

“Yeah, he’s the eldest son of the count of the Sacula region.”

If you think of him this way, it’s no wonder you’re nervous. “Do you not mean he is your uncle? I am sure he is eagerly awaiting to meet his cute niece.”

“Well... you may be right, but I’ve never met him.”

“Your mother should have explained everything to him. And he is supposed to be very kind, so I am sure it will be fine as long as you are polite.”

“I hope you’re right.”

“And I will help you as much as I can.”

“Really?”

As I nodded in agreement, Lady Maika finally smiled and relaxed. “I’m happy I could come to study in the city together with you. I would’ve been anxious on my own.”

“I am also very pleased.”

I had not anticipated being able to step outside the village so quickly. I could not be thankful enough for the providence of Mrs. Yuika.

While I was sending off my thoughts of gratitude towards the hometown I had left behind only this morning, Lady Maika blushed. Was she nervous again?

“I’m amazed by both of you,” the third person in the parlor and our chaperon, Mr. Quid, murmured enviously.

“You do not seem very nervous either.”

“By now I’ve gotten used to it. Thanks to you.”

“What did I do?”

“My business related to the aloe ointment usually takes place here.”

It was no surprise that Mrs. Yuika had immediately taken the business straight to the count’s manor, given that they were family.

“At first, I was extremely nervous,” Mr. Quid continued. “Even at my age, I was still as stiff as Maika.”

“In the end, this whole business changed your life, so it is only natural you would be anxious. There is much less at stake here for me.”

“Well, I’m relieved to hear you say that. Although it feels weird to always be reassured by someone younger than me.”

Lady Maika tried encouraging Mr. Quid, who looked rather serious now. “Don’t worry! It’s Ash after all!”

What’s that supposed to mean?

“You’re right. It *is* Ash.”

What do both of them think I am?

As Lady Maika had calmed down again, someone knocked on the door. In place of Lady Maika, who had been taken aback by surprise, I went to open the door. It was the maid.

“Thank you for your patience. The acting count, Itsuki Amanobe Sacula, is ready to meet you now. May I let him in?”

After taking a deep breath, Lady Maika replied to the bowing maid. “Yes, we are ready.”

“Very well.” She receded in a refined manner and gave way to a man in his mid-twenties.

“I am the acting count, Itsuki. I welcome you in place of our lord, who has left for the capital.”

In contrast with the formal greeting, he had a gentle look on his face. Especially when gazing at Lady Maika's face, he almost seemed to smile. While he made a sharp impression, his kind personality was shining through. There was no mistake—this was Mrs. Yuika's younger brother.

Lady Maika briefly caught her breath before replying to her uncle, whom she just had seen for the first time. "Thank you for gracing us with your presence. I extend my warmest greetings in place of Klein, the chief of Noscula village."

It was a textbook greeting. Back at the village, she had been a cheerful and lively young girl, but now she showed herself as the daughter of the village chief. Her parents had taught her well. It took a lot of practice to master such a pleasant, formal greeting. Lord Itsuki seemed impressed too; you could faintly hear him let out a gasp.

"I have brought you a report detailing the village's activities over the past year," Lady Maika continued.

"I will gladly accept it. Thank you for your hard work." Lord Itsuki nodded as he accepted the rolled-up and sealed bundle of papers. He looked pleased, and his serious expression was slowly transforming into a smile.

After a brief pause, he began as if he could not refrain himself anymore, saying, "Pardon me! I'm sure you don't mind me becoming a bit more personal now that the greeting and the village report business is over."

After assuming our agreement, Lord Itsuki, who had kept a calm and rigid expression until just a few moments ago, knelt down in front of Lady Maika to speak at eye level. "It's been a while Maika! Although I imagine you don't remember me, since you couldn't even speak back then."

"Ah... Uhm... Y-Yes. Unfortunately, I do not remember. But my mother has told me about us meeting before."

"I see. How much you've grown! I mean, I've known you since you were a baby! You were born in this very house. You've really become beautiful! You look so much like my sister."

Lord Itsuki was overwhelming Lady Maika with his excitement. Still, the reaction was normal considering he had not seen his niece in such a long time.

He reached out to caress her head. “Oh, you have your mother’s eyes, but your ears seem to come more after my dear brother-in-law. Your formal greeting from earlier also seemed a lot like his seriousness!”

“Is that so? I’ve learned about proper etiquette from my mother and...” She looked towards me in the middle of her sentence.

What is she trying to say?

“I mean, my mother has taught me all I know about etiquette!” she finished saying.

“I see, I see. Are my sister and brother-in-law still as happy together as ever?”

“Yes, very much so.”

While Lady Maika was still a bit perplexed, she answered on the spot when it came to her parents’ loving relationship. Her parents’ love was so strong that it even roped me into nodding along in agreement.

Upon hearing that, Lord Itsuki burst out into laughter. “As expected! Sacula’s favorite couple is still going strong!”

Sacula’s favorite couple? I wondered what they both had done during their time here. Since neither of them was really forthcoming, the only thing I knew was that there had been some commotion when they decided to get married.

Even more than myself, Lady Maika did not know how to respond. However, Lord Itsuki did not dwell on the subject for too long either. “I’ve been looking forward to your visit! I couldn’t wait to see with my own eyes how my sister and brother-in-law’s daughter had grown up.”

“Yes, thank you for giving me the opportunity to study—” She stopped in the middle of her formal words.

For a moment, it looked as if she had trouble finding the right words, but the next line out of her mouth showed how much she was her mother’s daughter.

“Thank you so much, Uncle!” Lady Maika looked up hesitantly, wondering if it had been okay to call him that way.

Lord Itsuki pressed his hands on his face. He seemed to be taken aback and at loss for words from pure happiness. “Please excuse me. I was just so moved... If

you don't mind, I'd be more than happy for you to keep calling me Uncle in private."

He was trying to contain his joy, but not very successfully. Lady Maika had splendidly responded to his request to act more personally towards him.

Seemingly aware of his shaky expression, Lord Itsuki turned away from his niece and toward Mr. Quid and me. "Please forgive me, you two," he said.

"Don't worry about us." As expected from a merchant, Mr. Quid tactfully shook his head as if he had not seen anything.

"Yes, I agree. It is only human to be overcome with emotion at a long-awaited reunion with a blood relative." Personally, my eyes had also become slightly watery at the sight of their interaction.

"Thanks for your understanding. I've met Quid several times now, but I think it's the first time we met."

"Apologies for my late introduction. I am Ash, from Noscula village. Thank you so much for granting a farmer like me the opportunity to study in the city. There are no words enough to express my gratitude for your kindness. I will repay my debt by working hard and achieving results." *Starting with an agricultural reform to increase food production, I'll work as hard as I can!*

Lord Itsuki seemed momentarily surprised by my enthusiasm, but quickly looked satisfied. "I can see why my sister and brother-in-law recommended you. I don't often see such a flawless greeting. Please excuse me if this sounds rude, but you don't look like a farmer boy at all."

Mr. Quid agreed without a moment's delay. "Yes, Ash is special. I don't know what to say other than he's brilliant."

"I think I've learned a lot from Ash in terms of my manners," Lady Maika added.

I did not think I had such a big influence on her manners. As far as I was concerned, it was the result of her parents' education. Although it was true that Mrs. Yuika had sometimes asked me for my opinion on her behavior.

After a bit of small talk, Lord Itsuki moved the conversation forward, saying,

“I’m looking forward to introducing you to the army academy. As you may have heard already, my younger brother, who is one year younger than Maika, will also take part.”

To Lady Maika, that was her younger uncle. In this world, this did not seem to be a rare occurrence—she just nodded along without any hesitation.

“Yes, his name is Lord Arthur, if I remember correctly.”

“You don’t need to address him as lord; I want you to treat him as an equal. That’s his wish too.” Lord Itsuki was smiling pleadingly as he looked at me, letting me know that this was also meant for me.

Then, he continued his explanation. “The army academy was founded by influential people related to this city, and it acts doubly as a place of education and exchange for their children. Since it’s also a place for creating social relations, you can’t completely free yourself of your status, but... it’s a good chance to make friends of your own age.”

According to Lord Itsuki, he had fond memories of the academy. He told us how he had found true friendship there. His nostalgic smile was worth a thousand words.

How splendid. I nodded along repeatedly while painting an exciting picture inside my head.

“I imagine that, as a public figure, it is important to have a person whom you can trust in private,” I said.

“Exactly! I’m in a position where I can’t even freely have a drink with anyone beneath my rank. You know what you’re talking about, Ash. Are you sure you’re just a farm boy?”

“I like reading books, and I have come across stories like that.”

I was referring to stories from my past life, but I said it with a look of innocence. I was not lying; I was merely hiding some things.

“Oh, you can read already? Ah, yes, I remember my sister mentioning it in her letter. You’re indeed very talented.”

“Not at all. I am not worthy of studying in this city, and my social standing is

on shaky grounds, to say the least. However, I will try my best to talk to your younger brother.”

“That’s the spirit! I was hopeful when my sister and my brother-in-law recommended you, but you may even be exceeding my expectations.”

I replied with a radiant smile to his words of praise.

After the events at the village, I was not too keen to talk to a boy my age, but I was willing to approach the child of an influential count. While I had said that I had no social standing and was not worthy of studying in this city, I was in fact filled with self-interests. However, listening to Lord Itsuki, I had to admit that it sounded fun to build a genuine friendship. I had pure adoration and impure expectations. I did not know which one took precedence. It was like the relation between an incendiary device and fuel.

Lord Itsuki was in the middle of another story when he was interrupted by a knock from the maid. “Lord Itsuki, it is time.”

“Ah, just a little longer...” He sounded like a child begging for only five more minutes of sleep in the morning.

“I am afraid there is no more time.”

“I’ll work a bit harder later.”

“I am afraid there is no more time.”

“I finally met with my niece.”

“I am afraid there is no more time.”

“It’s oka—”

“I am afraid there is no more time.”

After having all his objections shot down, he decisively stood up. “Alright, I got it. I’m sorry you three, but work is calling me. Quid, thank you for bringing these two here.”

“I was on my way here anyway and I already received a reward. Besides, if it’s a request from these two, I’ll gladly oblige any time.”

Lord Itsuki expressed his gratitude towards the peddler’s words with a nod.

Then, he addressed us. “Maika, Ash. We have prepared your accommodations. You’ll be living together with the other children at a dormitory. Please wait here until someone comes to show you the way.”

“Thank you for your consideration,” Lady Maika said.

“I am glad you granted us some of your precious time.”

Lord Itsuki smiled in response. “I really enjoyed talking to you. Let’s meet again once things have calmed down a bit.” He reluctantly looked at our bowed heads—or rather he mostly looked at Lady Maika—before gallantly leaving the room.

His painfully hesitant stride was pressed on by the maid’s footsteps close behind him. His behavior showed a lingering attachment to his niece.

“The future count is quite the interesting character,” I remarked.

As I expressed my opinion regarding the person who had entered and left the room in a completely different manner, I was met with a lukewarm gaze from the two people next to me.

The maid led Lady Maika and me to a separate residence. The stone building where we had been until earlier was the administrative hall, where the affairs of the city and its surrounding areas were governed. Located next to it was the feudal lord’s dwelling, and adjacent on the opposite side was this residence, which was also made of stone. Most likely, it had been built to match the administrative hall. It was an imposing building, standing out from the rest, possibly in an attempt to communicate that it was housing the future leaders of the city.

The maid explained that, apart from the common area, the residence was divided into a boys’ area on the first floor and a girls’ area on the second floor. The reason for the girls being housed on the second floor was simple: the first floor was easier to access for intruders.

My room was all the way at the back of the first floor. I took my luggage and knocked on the door of what was going to be my new room. Since rooms were generally shared by two people, I did not want to just suddenly enter.

“Yes, come in.”

My roommate had a pretty, high-pitched voice. I imagined them as a skinny boy as I opened the door and greeted them with a bow.

“Sorry for intruding. My name is Ash. I will be your roommate starting from today.”

“I’ve been waiting for you.”

As I had expected from the tone of the voice, I was jovially greeted by a skinny person. They looked like a fine young noble with smooth blonde hair, fresh clothes, and a calm smile. Their beautiful slender face and listless expression would have been capable of charming the women of the world with a mere sigh.

“You can call me Arthur.”

Yes, my roommate was Arthur Amanobe Sacula, whom acting count Lord Itsuki had told me to get along with just earlier. The younger brother did not look anything like Lord Itsuki or Mrs. Yuika. Apparently, this was because he had a different mother. The current count had remarried a woman from the capital, and he was their only child.

“Understood. I look forward to our time together, Arthur.”

“I prefer not being too formal. I like to break free from the social norms.”

“Yes, please go ahead. Do not mind my formality. I have just gotten into the habit of speaking this way from reading a lot of books. I know it is childish, but I am easily influenced by fictional stories.”

My manner of speaking was in fact influenced by my past life, but I put all the blame on my reading. Books truly were magnificent tools. I had always been getting strange looks due to how I spoke, since I talked like this even with my parents. However, once I started matching my words with my eccentricity, they stopped paying it any mind. I wanted to believe that was a good thing.

“Are you sure? I’ve heard you come from a farmer family.”

“Yes, indeed. Have you heard that from Lord Itsuki? I have been rummaging through the books of the village church. I assure you I am very informal on the

inside, so please treat me as such.”

“So, there are still some villages where the church system works, huh?”

I mean, the Noscula one wasn't really working either, but I made it work.

Even now that Maika and I had left, Tanya and Jigil were still studying at the church. And Father Folke seemed to be properly teaching them too. I felt a little proud to see Ar—Lord Arthur admire our village.

“It’s rare to hear of a church that properly fulfills its duties nowadays. Lord Itsu—my brother said it was amazing. And you’re the top student of such an amazing village.”

“In regard to the numbers of books read, I can say with confidence that I am indeed number one.”

I had read even more than Father Folke. Well, probably not if we counted the books which he had read outside the village, but that was not a fair comparison. Eventually, I was going to catch up though.

“I see. You’re more interesting than I had expected. Looks like it’ll be fun around here.”

“I am flattered. I am looking forward to our adventures too.”

I smiled as I firmly grasped the hand which Arthur held out. It felt rough, possibly from sword training. But even more so, it felt small.

What should I do? I repeated this phrase several times at the back of my head while keeping up my smile.

The truth is, I was not sure which pronoun to use for the youngest of the house of Count Sacula. Honestly, I was even inclined to say “she.”

At this age, it was not unusual for a child to look like the opposite sex. However, men and women had a different bone structure in the hip and shoulder areas. While Lord Arthur was not wearing any clothes that particularly revealed their body outline, I could tell from their movements... In other words, “she” had dressed to look like a boy. This spelled trouble.

If they were a trans person, that would have been totally fine. It would have just been a case of them matching their looks to their gender identity. But in

Lord Arthur's case, they were born into an influential family. Not to mention that they looked completely different than any of their siblings. Officially, this was due to them having different mothers, but I was not fully convinced... They must have been hiding something.

I wanted to ask Lord Itsuki why I had been put into the same room as his younger brother, but at the same time, I was afraid of the consequences. I needed to act carefully and be prepared for whatever move Lord Arthur was planning. I did not want to leave a bad impression in case they found out that I had noticed. If I tried too hard to cover for their secret, it was sure to get blown wide open. In the worst-case scenario, they would end up thinking that I had been deceiving them. In the best-case scenario, on the other hand, they would embrace me with gratitude for acting tactfully.

For now, it was probably best to just think of them as someone, possibly a girl, who had suddenly become my roommate due to unspecified personal reasons. *Man, that sounds like the beginning of a romantic comedy.*

It felt like the beginning of a story. The possibility of me being in trouble completely went away as my bookworm mind took over—I burst into excitement. I could not believe I was so close to such an interesting person!

“By the way, Arthur, have you heard about Maika, who has come with me from the village?”

“Yeah, I’ve heard. She’s my... niece.”

“Yes, exactly. If you do not mind, would you want to meet her? I think it would be the first time you meet, but she is your family after all.”

“Sure.”

It looked like they were hesitating when I mentioned the word “family,” but I might have just been overthinking.

Lord Arthur nodded with a fresh smile. “Can you introduce me?”

“Of course. I want my friends to get along.”

“Friends...”

I was going to relentlessly keep pushing Lord Arthur, who seemed surprised.

They had said that they wanted to break free after all. I was ready to tear down the wall around them.

“Maika is a friend of mine, and now we are friends too, so you two are already friends by extension.” I readily expanded my circle of friends to everyone.

Let’s keep roping in more and more people so we can share our pain, our sadness, our impulses, our ambitions, our troubles, and our worries. Let’s find solutions together. My plan needed numbers to succeed, after all.

Not aware of my inner thoughts, which maybe could have been interpreted as an evil scheme, Lord Arthur muttered the following words. “So, we’re friends?”

“Is that a problem?”

Even if they did not like it, I had no intention of letting them go at this point.

“No, I’m happy.” Their smile seemed more bashful than earlier.

“I am glad to hear that.” I was indeed glad I did not have to convince them.

“Could you please wait a moment? I have an appointment in the lobby after putting down my luggage.”

“Yes, sure.”

Finally, things were calming down a bit after an eventful first day. Although I had expected nothing less from the city.

Arthur’s Perspective

I arrived here a month ago. Back then, I still was myself. And I was hesitant to turn into the lie called “Arthur.”

The vibrations of the horse carriage were shaking every bone in my body. Having traveled like this for the past two weeks, I could no longer hide my boredom. I voiced my sorrow with a barely audible sigh—I didn’t want anyone to notice my dissatisfaction. After all, this boring journey only took place to guarantee my safety, so I held back. I didn’t want to cause any more trouble than I had already. Therefore, I didn’t complain about the unbelievably bumpy

road compared to the ones in the capital. Or the fact that the inside of the carriage was completely shut off to avoid prying eyes.

I noticed my face muscles moving. *Don't think about it. Just hold it in*, I told myself.

While I may have been a helpless child incapable of properly defending myself, I was quite confident in my restraint. Or rather, that was about the only thing I had confidence in.

As I was thinking that, I felt a sneer come over my face. *So much for my restraint.*

"Lord Arthur." Someone called from the outside.

I opened the wooden window to talk to the knight accompanying me.

"What is it, Sir George?"

"Itsutsu city of the Sacula region has come into our sight. I thought that maybe you wished to take a look at it."

I blinked at the words of the knight, who had fulfilled his duty on this journey with such rigidity that using the word "loyalty" to describe him would have been an understatement. Sir George had perfectly executed his mission of escorting me without attracting any attention to a point where I was fed up as much as I was grateful.

"Are you sure it's fine?"

"At this point, I don't think there will be any problems. Besides, there is currently no one else in sight." He talked with a caring expression on his face. I could see why this admirable man had been chosen as my escort.

The knight appeared to feel sorry for having to put me through such a tiresome journey. If possible, he would have loved to make it easier and more comfortable. However, he didn't give in to his personal feelings, and faithfully carried out his orders. This was indeed a man worthy of the count's trust.

"Thank you. In that case, I'll have a look."

To be honest, at this point I didn't even care anymore. However, I also had had an itch to stretch my body for the past ten days.

I opened the carriage door and set foot on the ground. As someone who was used to the stone pavement of the capital, it was strange to feel the bare soil covered in wild-growing grass under my feet. It was as if the ground was telling me that I didn't belong here. *And it's true. I'm sure I'll end up bothering a lot of people. But it'll only be for a little while.*

My acknowledgment seemed to calm down the ground. Of course, it was all just my imagination. The only one thinking that I didn't belong here was none other than myself. I already wanted to leave. Nonetheless, I intended to behave appropriately in order to be accepted here. Even if that meant pretending to be someone I'm not.

"Lord Arthur, please look this way," Sir George said to me as I was facing down gazing at the ground.

I need to be careful. I put on a smile and shifted my attention to the direction he had pointed out.

The river ahead split into two streams, embracing a hill like a goddess stretching out her arms. Atop that hill stood a stone wall unfitting of this beautiful scenery.

"That is the city wall protecting Itsutsu."

"That stone wall?"

It took a lot of effort not to sound too disappointed. Most people would have imagined an iron wall surrounding the city of Itsutsu, which was at the heart of the Sacula region, and known for being the location where heroic tales of fighting back demons took place. In contrast, this stone wall looked unsteady and crooked, even from this far away. It didn't seem to be very tall either, and its depth was most likely uneven across its length. It gave the impression of being a toy that children had built with blocks of wood. Compared to the capital's city and castle walls, which didn't have a single crack despite yearlong wear and tear from rain and wind, this was...

"Do you think it's unsightly?" Sir George clearly spoke out the words that I had refrained from saying. He had an air of pride about him. "Since the arrival of His Excellency, the first Count of Sacula, this wall has repelled thousands of demons and protected tens of thousands of people over the years. All this time,

these stones have kept standing tirelessly no matter the damage.”

He pointed out a slightly lower part of the wall before continuing. “Seventy years ago, a flying dragon crashed into that part. On impact, the top of the wall crumbled and it’s been like this ever since.”

His finger wandered towards a part that looked like it had unnaturally caved in. “Forty years ago, when a group of treants attacked, that outer wall looked like it was about to collapse. To prevent a tragedy, they hurriedly built an emergency wall on the inside and succeeded in repelling the enemy. However, since they used parts of that emergency wall for repairs, it looks a bit crooked now.”

After hearing those stories, I started to understand. Those unsightly parts of the city wall were like scars detailing all its victories against incoming threats over the years.

“Given the nature of this area, this unsightly wall is about the only thing we can feel proud of. All the warriors of Sacula agree that it is a great monument to their achievements.”

There was a saying that “Knights are the stones of the wall.” When faced with an enemy attack, they stood alongside the wall, fighting and getting hurt. And in the next battle, Sir George was going to be among them.

As one stone of this scarred barrier, Sir George held his hand to his chest and swore. “From today on, this unsightly wall will protect you! Rest assured.”

Hearing those words, my smile slipped away for a brief moment before I recomposed myself. “Thank you, Sir George. I am counting on you.”

“Yes, Lord Arthur.” It was a perfectly bland answer, but the knight’s face looked a bit sad.

I was anxious. This region was nothing like the capital, and I didn’t know anyone. I was on my own. At the same time, I had to make sure not to let my guard down. I needed to avoid any careless mistakes and not stand out from the crowd, so I didn’t expose this lie.

It was going to be alright as long as I kept my head down and wore a cloak over my face. Seemingly, I needed to hide my thoughts as well. All in all, it was

not much different from my life in the capital. This was for the best. This way, I wouldn't bother anyone.

Still, this unsightly city wall kept grabbing my attention. I was not used to seeing such an unevenly-shaped structure in the capital. The wall stood tall, not caring about anyone mocking its appearance. It was as if it eloquently told me that a whole new world was waiting for poor little me.

My chest was throbbing. Could it be? Maybe here I could... My heart skipped a beat. At that same moment, the wind started blowing, as if moved by my emotions.

“Woah...” What a strong wind. I felt my body waver as I closed my eyes and covered my face. *I guess this place hates me after all.*



“This is a sign of good luck.” Sir George smiled at the wind as if he was sending off a friend.

“Good luck?”

“Yes. This is a wind particular to this season. His Excellency, the first Count of Sacula, who laid the foundation of this city wall, came to this area accompanied by this same wind. It is said to be a sign of good luck for new beginnings. In fact, it was also blowing when a friend of mine set out to become a merchant. Apparently, he struggled at first, but recently he has been doing very well. He told me that he has been praying in the direction of the wind.”

I understood this as a superstitious belief that doing so would let you share the good luck of our great ancestors.

With that in mind, I asked, “Isn’t it a little bit too rough for that? It doesn’t have to blow this strong.”

“It takes a lot of strength to move forward. This strong wind gives the people of Sacula the necessary push.”

The strong wind blew once again, as if to confirm Sir George’s statement. But to me, it just felt as if it was trying to snatch away the veil that I had cast over my mind.

In order to avoid the public eye, the horse carriage stopped at the back of the lord’s mansion. At arrival, a maid swiftly greeted us and led me inside the building.

“Please forgive my rudeness. I was ordered to avoid the public eye as much as possible, so I skipped the formalities. My name is Rihn.” The maid deeply bowed her head.

At first glance, she looked strict—just like Sir George. I wondered if all the people from the Sacula region were this strict and serious. The count seemed quite... dynamic and laid back when I met him in the capital.

“I am aware of your circumstances. If there is anything you need, please do not hesitate to ask me.”

“Thank you very much, Miss Rihn.” I politely replied with a nod.

She reciprocated before reprimanding me. “Please don’t be so formal. You can just call me Rihn. After all, you are interacting with me as the son of the Count of Sacula.”

“Got you, Rihn. Is that okay?”

“Yes. Thank you.”

“No, thank you. I’m still not used to being Arthur.”

She was right. While it may not have mattered when dealing with outsiders, it was important to use the right language for my own maid. As Arthur, I was a member of this house, after all.

“If I make any other mistakes, don’t hesitate to point them out.”

“Yes, My Lord. That is my duty.”

Behind my smile, I was quite tense due to her strictness. However, similar to Sir George, this was also a sign of loyalty for her.

“Please let me explain some details about your current situation, Lord Arthur.”

According to Rihn, I had been living here for the past three months. As the youngest child of the count, born and raised in the capital, I was brought here to join the army academy. As a result of my long journey and the change of environment, I had fallen ill and stayed in bed, but now, I had finally recovered. That was my background story.

“Since only a limited number of people were taking care of you, it is best for you to treat everyone as if it was your first time meeting them. Given your circumstances, I am certain no one will mind a slightly awkward response from your part.”

“I see... So I’m supposed to be the child of the count’s second wife. Although I assume most people will think of me as the child of his mistress...”

“I am afraid so.”

That would have been the natural reaction to someone arriving from the

capital without any attendants. I would have been lying if I said that I didn't mind at all. Imagining the judging stares from the public didn't feel good. However, it was miles better than the looks I had received as "my real self" back in the capital. I was going to persevere.

"Got it. I'm prepared for that. Is there anything else I need to look out for?"

"Yes. I will have to inform you of the count's family relations and dealings."

"Yeah, it would be strange if I didn't know those."

"Similarly, if there is anything you need, you can always count on me. Of course, Sir George will also be at your disposal."

Rihn glared me down as if she was telling me to obey her words. Her look scolded me to rely on others whenever it was needed. I didn't know how to reply, and once again my smile started to crumble.

Seeing my face, Rihn broke the silence. "Let us start with relatives in the city. I assume you are already aware of the acting count, Lord Itsuki. Next, we have Mother Yae, his young cousin, who resides in the temple. She is one of the teachers at the army academy, so you will probably interact with her frequently. I should also mention that Sir George and I will also be teaching you."

After she had finished the explanation detailing various city residents, I heard someone approaching the door. Rihn stopped talking and seemed alarmed, but Sir George reassured her.

"Those footsteps are from Lord Itsuki—you don't need to worry. He seems to be alone too."

And indeed, it was my new older brother who knocked and entered the room.

"Oh Arthur, you look well today!"

The loud voice and the vivid smile, paired with his rapid, long stride made him appear both dynamic and rustic at the same time. Maybe a bit more on the rustic side. Judging from Rihn and Sir George's reactions, he seemed to be acting like a different person.

The acting count enthusiastically patted my shoulders. "You don't need to

worry anymore! Enjoy Sacula as much as possible!” My new older brother winked at me. His words were directed at the Arthur who had stayed in bed for the past three months as well as the one who had just arrived today.

“Thank you, Lord Itsuki.”

“Haha, don’t be so formal! You’re my adorable little brother! Just call me Itsuki!”

Rihn came to my defense. “It may be a bit difficult for him to be so informal with you.”

“Is that so? If it were me... Well, I can’t bring myself to call my dear sister simply by her first name either...” After thinking for a moment, he nodded. “That’s it! How about you just call me “Brother” too? That should be fine, right?”

“That is indeed a good idea. That might even prevent some meddling into Lord Arthur’s affairs if people think that the two brothers get along well,” Rihn said.

“Then, it’s decided!” he happily exclaimed.

Lord Itsuki looked at me in anticipation with glowing eyes. *Guess I’ll have to actually say it.*

“Uhm...” I hesitated, but Lord Itsuki just kept smiling at me. Rihn and Sir George didn’t show any signs of intervening either. “My dear brother?”

“Yes! I look forward to spending time with you here, my brother!”

My dear brother looked overjoyed as he laughed and patted my shoulders. Rihn and Sir George, who had stayed quiet for the most part, now stepped in, telling him to stop patting people’s shoulders so forcefully.

Once again, I felt my fake smile slip away. This was the first time that an older brother was staring at my face this closely.

“Have you already told him about the army academy?” my brother asked.

“Not yet. And I still need to talk to him about your sister Lady Yuika and her daughter Lady Maika, as well as the boy,” Rihn said.

“Would you mind if I explain it?”

“Please keep it short.” Rihn agreed, but not without a warning.

“My older sister Yuika, who is the oldest daughter of our house, is currently living together with my brother-in-law Klein in a village called Noscula. My sister is much more suited to city life than I am, but she is just so enamored with my brother-in-law, who is a wonderful person, and—”

“Please keep it short, Lord Itsuki.”

“Oh, but I’ve only just started talking?”

“Please keep it short, Lord Itsuki.”

“Okay, got it.”

Rihn glared at him with a look as unsettling as a ballista ready to fire.

“Well, anyways, they are a wonderful couple with a wonderful daughter. She is two years older than you.” Murmuring under his breath, he added, “I haven’t met her in ten years myself either.”

If she’s two years older than me and he hasn’t met her in ten years, wouldn’t that mean he last saw her when she was a baby? Is that enough to assert that she’s wonderful? Could it be that this guy is just very amicable towards all his relatives?

Besides these trivial doubts, I had understood the gist of the conversation. Since she was of similar age, she was likely going to join the army academy too.

“Her name is Maika. Make sure to get along with her.”

“Yes.” *I will make sure of it.*

I didn’t give much thought to the statement at first, since it came across naturally, but was that an order?

“Anyhow, she is the daughter of my sister Yuika and my brother-in-law Klein. She is intelligent, excellent at judging other people’s character, and physically strong too! She’s got the best of both her parents!”

It felt more like he was boasting about his niece rather than giving an order. Regardless, she did indeed sound like a wonderful person. She was not just

intelligent and had good social skills, but she had physical strength too.

“Oh, and there is one more person who will join the army academy on the basis of my sister and my brother-in-law’s recommendation.”

“Besides their daughter?”

“Yes, he is a farm boy... It might be difficult to believe, but he is an incredibly talented person, so make sure to get along with him too.”

“I will.”

That was rare, but I could understand the logic of admitting a farm boy if he was talented enough. Anyway, why did that concern me?

“Arthur, with the addition of that farm boy, there will be an even number of boys at this year’s army academy.”

“Okay.”

“Normally, two people share a dormitory there.”

“...Okay.”

I had come here as the count’s son, Arthur. In other words, as a boy. I went along with it, as I was told that it would be easier to deceive my pursuer this way.

“Wait, are you saying my roommate will be...?”

“Yes, I’m thinking of putting you two in a room together.”

However, when my brother told me that I had to share a room with a boy, I was no longer as convinced of the plan.

“I know I’m in no position to argue, but are you sure that is going to be alright?” I asked.

“I’m worried. At first, I was thinking about letting you commute from this mansion due to health concerns if we couldn’t come up with the perfect camouflage.”

But it appeared that something had changed his mind.

“When my dear sister heard about your situation, she said that it might be

better to let you live in the dormitory. According to her, there is no need to worry if you share a room with that farm boy. And I wholeheartedly trust her talent to judge people.”

“I see.”

Personally, this wasn’t something I could readily agree to. Even if my roommate had been Lord Itsuki’s son, I couldn’t have blindly trusted him. Much less when it came to a farm boy who hadn’t received a proper education, no matter how talented he might’ve been.

In the end, though, I nodded in agreement. “I’ll leave the decision to you, my dear brother.”

I was in no position to voice my opinion. All I could do was smile and nod along. At least I wouldn’t be bothering anyone that way.

“I’m sorry for making you worry.” Lord Itsuki bowed his head. “If there is any problem, let me know right away. I’ll have Rihn keep an eye on you too. As I said earlier, it’s always possible for you to commute from here if anything goes wrong.” He repeated that it was just a measure based on his trust in his older sister Yuika; an attempt to perfect my disguise.

“Yes, I understand. I’m sorry for bothering you.”

“You don’t have to worry about bothering anyone,” he insisted while shaking his head and looking at me as if I was a hurt bird.

One month had passed since my arrival, and today, I was finally going to meet my roommate. Rihn, who was the dorm supervisor, informed me of his schedule and urged my caution.

“Presently, he is waiting to meet with Lord Itsuki. Once they have finished, he will be making his way to the dormitory. I assume Lord Itsuki will take as much time as possible to talk with Lady Maika, so it might take a while before he arrives here.”

“Got it, thanks.”

Rihn’s careful consideration had saved me a lot of trouble until now. But even

with the help of a talented maid like her, I felt uneasy about meeting someone of the opposite sex. And on top of it all, he was a farm boy, who probably didn't know much about manners or proper hygiene. I would endure as much as possible, but I was still scared.

"So, this boy called Ash... What's he like?"

"I have yet to meet him myself, so I can only go by what the maid of the administrative halls says..." Rihn was being unusually hesitant as she chose her words. "According to that maid, both children had impeccable manners."

I wasn't sure how to process this information.

"So, they were both behaving appropriately?" I asked.

I couldn't understand how a farm boy without education had manners on par with those of a girl from a noble lineage who had received an appropriate education.

Seeing my confusion, Rihn nodded in affirmation before elaborating. "To be precise, it seemed that the farm boy was calmer than the nervous Lady Maika... and he was even backing her up."

"Are you sure the other maid didn't mix them up?"

"You may be inclined to think so, but Lady Maika looks just like her mother, so it would have been obvious to any maid in this house who is Lady Yuika's daughter. Besides, while the farm boy's clothes weren't too plain, there was a clear difference in the quality of their outfits."

"In that case, I guess it's true..."

I didn't know what to make of this. It looked like I had misjudged the person I was about to meet.

"Lord Arthur, please calm down. So far there has been no bad news, so you don't need to worry."

"Really?" *No bad news? I guess she is right.*

My roommate was said to be well-mannered and extremely calm. That was good news. I was just... perplexed.

“Thanks, Rihn. I’ll just engage with him politely for now.”

“Yes, I don’t think there will be any problems given his manners. However, I will be on standby, just in case.”

I started to feel a bit excited. Thanks to Rihn, I had calmed down some, but my heart was still racing. I was overcome with emotions and I could no longer stand still. I had never felt like this before in the capital. I didn’t know what to do. I wondered what kind of person Ash was. I tried imagining him, but nothing felt right.

While mumbling to myself, I kept walking back and forth in my small room. Eventually, I heard footsteps in the hallway. Was that him? That must have been him. They stopped in front of the door and knocked.

Since I was used to my maid or servant answering the door, I almost forgot to say something. In a panic, I answered in a high-pitched voice. “Yes, come in.”

The door gave way to a red-haired boy with a gentle smile.

“Sorry for intruding. My name is Ash. I will be your roommate starting from today.”

He was indeed very polite, and seemed elegant compared to some of the ruder high-society city folk. It also looked like he was taking great care of his appearance. While his clothes were rather plain, they were free of any dirt or frayed spots.

Due to my upbringing, I observed him for a moment before replying. “You can call me Arthur.”

It took me about a month to get used to introducing myself this way. I no longer heard my own name. Lying became my only reality. I felt how my self-identity became more and more ambiguous each day.

I was glad that Ash was talking to me in such a friendly manner. Although I had to admit that his overly-formal manner of speaking was a bit strange, it felt like the more we talked the friendlier he became.

“Yes, the church in Noscula village is fulfilling its function as an educational institution. When I left, the number of students had increased to eight. I

imagine Master Folke is doing his best.”

“Master Folke? Is that the name of the priest dispatched to your village?”

“Yes. I refer to him as Master Folke to express my deep affection and respect towards him, and various other things.”

“He must be a respectable person. I’ve never heard of someone properly running their church in a village. That’s quite the achievement.”

“You are giving him too much credit. He is a severely hopeless case, so you should not praise him too much. Otherwise, he might end up with difficulty breathing from sneezing in rapid succession.”

“What do you mean? Now I’m confused about this Master Folke’s reputation.”

This must have been what people call “silly banter.” Ash didn’t ask anything about my upbringing or current situation. I assumed he was holding back. At the same time, I also felt like he didn’t really care that much.

Ash just kept on talking. “His reputation? Mmh... An intelligent crook? Or maybe the devil’s errand boy?”

“He is a priest, right?”

“Yes, he is. But he used to be a zombie.”

“What? A zombie?”

“He is fundamentally a good person, but he has an extremely unhealthy lifestyle and stranger mannerisms, so I usually try to lower the expectations when introducing him to someone else. Especially thinking about the dignity of the Church. I do not dare putting him on the same level as all the other refined priests. I do not want to anger the three gods.”

“Hahaha. Wait, the more you talk, the less I understand.”

It was almost unfair how funny everything that came out of this guy’s mouth was. I worried slightly about my current facial expression, but I couldn’t stop laughing. My body felt hot and my shoulders were trembling. To make matters worse, the source of my laughter, Ash, just didn’t stop. It had been a long while since I enjoyed myself this much. It got to a point where I ended up huffing and

puffing from laughter, but eventually, the conversation calmed down a bit. I would have never imagined that I was going to have this much fun before he had even unpacked his luggage.

“By the way, Arthur, have you heard about Maika, who has come with me from the village?”

“Yeah, I’ve heard. She’s my... niece.”

“Yes, exactly. If you do not mind, would you want to meet her? I think it would be the first time you meet, but she is your family after all.”

Family. That word reminded me of my older brother, who saw me as an enemy; and my father, who always came up with excuses to not help me. I associated both their faces with vigilance and sorrow, colder than any winter wind.

Even though my body temperature had risen from the excitement of talking to Ash, it immediately froze down again. This was no good. I couldn’t let him notice my change in mood, or else he was going to start worrying about me. That was the last thing I wanted. After all, I was used to this emotion, so there was no need to worry. I put on my usual fake smile.

“Sure,” I said.

I don’t think he noticed. However, I was not entirely confident, as I could see Ash’s expression changing slightly.

“Can you introduce me to her?” I added.

“Of course.” Ash’s smile looked even warmer than before. “I want my friends to get along.”

“Friends...” *He just said friends, right?*

My frozen heart started throbbing again. Or rather, I felt it burning. I was slightly embarrassed. That was strange. Why was I so flustered even though he only said that he wanted to be friends?

As I was trying to suppress my shaking, I realized why. *Come to think of it, he might be my first friend.*

I had met many marquis or viscounts eager to shake my hand, but none of

them wanted to be my friends. They just treated me as a part of their faction in an attempt to curry favor with my family for their own benefits and convenience.

Contrary to them, Ash was the son of a farmer, and I felt that I could take him at his word. Even if he had ulterior motives, I couldn't see them going beyond him wanting me to teach him something. It already felt like a true friendship. I had yearned for this ever since I read about it in a book. Although I would have never admitted it out loud. Did he really want to be my friend?

"Maika is a friend of mine, and now we are friends too, so you are already friends by extension."

There was no mistake. I was just slightly sad that I didn't make my first friend as my true self. But I realized that was selfish, because, after all, this was still me. *I should be content*, I thought. Feeling this happy was enough. Really. Asking for anything more would have just been selfish.

"So, we're friends?"

"Is that a problem?"

Ash asked me with a gentle and warm smile. It made me feel that, no matter how I answered, he was still going to be my friend.

"No, I'm happy."

I wished I could have just simply accepted his smile. I should have just left it at that. But the lie that was weighing heavily on my heart made me add the following words.

"I think."

I am happy. I truly am. But...

He was the first person who wanted to be my friend, but I couldn't bring myself to give him a clear answer. After all, I was nothing but a lump of lies. And there was nothing worse than lying to your friends. While I was an uncertain mess of a person, this sadness was undoubtedly mine.

Maika's Perspective

The dorm room where I was going to spend the next two years came furnished with a very energetic young girl. Maybe that was a slightly rude way of putting it—she was my roommate after all.

“Hello, my name is Reina. I am the daughter of Rihn, who works as a maid for the Count of Sacula.”

Hehe, what a cute name.

At first glance, she looked mature. Maybe it was due to the way she was standing up straight, but she looked tall. Her tightly closed lips and wide eyes made it seem as if she had thrown away all her childish desires. The straight posture was surely a result of her upbringing as the daughter of a maid; it didn't look like it came from martial arts training. *I could easily win against this girl*, I thought.

With a feeling of relief, I politely replied to her greeting. “Nice to meet you. I am Maika Noscula. I look forward to living with you for the next two years.”

“My mother has told me all about you, Lady Maika. Oh, I forgot to mention: my mother is the dorm supervisor, but she is not in charge of assigning the rooms. That is Lord Itsuki's task.”

The dorm supervisor? I guess that means she's an important person around here. For Ash's sake too, I should probably try to get along with her.

“I see. If you want, you can address me more casually. Since we are going to live together, we don't have to be so formal,” I proposed.

“I think I would agree.” Reina spoke in a quiet voice as she bowed with her eyes closed. How cute! It showed that she was still a girl my age even though she appeared more mature.

“Let's talk as friends then! You can just call me Maika.”

“Are you sure that's okay?”

“Yeah. You can take your time getting used to it.”

I shrugged my shoulders at the hesitation on her face. My mother was the count's eldest daughter after all. It may have been difficult for Reina to drop the formal address right away.

“Since I grew up in a farm village, all my friends just called me Maika there, so I don’t mind at all. You don’t need to worry.”

“Understood. I will consult about it with my mother.”

“Whenever you feel ready. It’s also my first time in the city, so I have a lot of questions for you too.”

I wanted to taste all the delicious food of the city, like all the sweets and the meat. I didn’t really have the opportunity to eat those things back at the village... Although, admittedly, recently I’d been able to eat a fair share of those delicacies thanks to Ash being amazing.

I had to unpack my luggage and hurry to the lobby to meet up with Ash. Now that we lived in the same building, I no longer had to worry about my curfew at night. I needed to make the most out of this situation.

After I had finished putting all my stuff into the empty side of the cabinet, Reina stared at me in wonder.

“Have you already finished? Is this all you carried with you?”

“Yes.”

I had carefully sorted out my belongings and only brought what was necessary, as I had learned from my dad. My point of reference had been the baggage that he took on his marches as a soldier. His sword and a dagger were probably the heaviest things he carried.

“What about your other luggage?”

“I don’t have any more.”

Inside Quid’s horse carriage there were still a lot of goods that Ash had brought, though.

“What about your clothes?!”

“Oh, I’m fine.” So that was what she was worried about. “Once Quid has sold Ash’s goods, I will buy new clothes and various other things with that money here in the city.”

“Ash? Is that the farm boy from the same village as you?” She was in disbelief.

Hehe. You can't lump him together with those run-of-the-mill farmers.

"Ash was the biggest breadwinner in all of Noscula village!"

Anything Ash had produced, starting with the aloe ointment, the honey, and the medicine, had sold at an incredible pace. My mom always said that his talents were a godsend. Apparently, we were lacking the money to finance our stay in the city until Ash consulted with my mom and Quid. They decided to sell some materials from our village which hadn't been up for sale until now.

It seemed that the demand for Ash's products was so big that it couldn't be matched with our current supply. The reason was simply the lack of proper transportation and communication between cities and villages. This world desperately needed the power of an interconnected public transport system! *Or at least that's what Ash is always murmuring to himself. I still don't really know what it means, but it sounds cool.*

Most of the luggage inside Quid's carriage was goods that Ash was going to try and sell for the highest price around the city. In other words, that luggage would transform into our new clothes.

After I tried explaining all this to Reina, she seemed even more confused. "I'm not sure I understand what you are saying, Lady Maika."

Don't worry, I don't either. The only thing you need to understand is this. "It just means that Ash is amazing!" Once you see it with your own eyes, you'll get it.

When I asked Ash during the journey, he laughed it off, saying, "Once there are paved roads, you will be able to experience it for yourself." My heartbeat raced at the sight of his smile, capable of pushing away all obstacles.

"I'm done unpacking! What do you plan on doing after this, Reina? I'm going to meet up with Ash."

"I will go see my mother and ask her how I should interact with you."

"Okay, I'll see you later then!" I waved at her before leaving the room.

When I got to the lobby, Ash was nowhere to be found. I wondered if he was still in his room. I peered into the hallway of the boy's area. The frail winter

sunlight shone through the crevices of the wooden shutters, only to be bounced back by someone's red hair with a significantly increased order of magnitude.

It was Ash! My face lit up as soon as I saw him. When I waved at him, he reciprocated. *Yay!*

Behind him walked another boy with blonde hair. I assumed this was his roommate Arthur, whom my uncle had talked about. Ash was so quick at making new friends. As he always said, "Friends are important, connections are useful, and more allies equal more power!"

Arthur's hair was blonde, but it didn't reflect the light as much as Ash's. Her refined features resembled those of a doll, and she seemed to be the quiet type. While her clothes weren't too flashy, they were still fashionable. Or to put it simply, she was the epitome of a city girl. She was a different type of beautiful than me. This was alarming. I needed to make sure she wasn't going to steal Ash's heart—Wait what?!

I took a good second look at Arthur's face. It was very cute and feminine. But Arthur was a boy, right? There was no way that a girl could have stayed in the boys' dormitory. If that had been an option, I would have wanted to move in with Ash!

I was about to shout, but muffled my voice. Ash gave me a serious look while keeping his usual gentle smile. His expression acted as a warning that I was about to do something risky.

How rare! He barely ever showed this face. How lucky I was! Although, by the time they got to the lobby, Arthur's gender was still a mystery to me.

"Sorry for making you wait, Maika!"

"Don't worry, I just arrived too."

I should be able to determine their gender while the two of them stand side by side for comparison, I thought.

"This is my roommate, Arthur. He is your uncle, but you both are roughly the same age, and he is a very friendly person."

So he was a boy after all! Ash also acted as if Arthur was someone of the same

sex. Why had I mistaken him for a girl at first sight? I guessed he was just that sort of person; he was cute after all. Ash also had some adorable features. Still, I couldn't let my guard down just yet.

"Nice to meet you, Maika. Is it okay if I call you like that? I'm still younger than you, so I'm not sure."

"You're not younger by that much. But yeah, you can call me Maika. I'll call you Arthur too."

While shaking Arthur's hand, I tried reading his facial cues. He had a beautiful smile, but it reminded me of Ash's from a couple of years ago. It was the smile of someone who was hiding a lot of pain and suffering on the inside. I used to be bad at dealing with this kind of smile, as it had always brought me to the verge of tears. However, now I was fine. Although I still hated it. I hated that it made me feel like I had been stabbed in the chest.

"Good luck, Arthur!" I said to him.

"Oh, yes, let's all do our best!"

No! That's not what I meant.

He had misunderstood it as a cheer for our upcoming studies at the academy. What I wanted to say was, "Good luck being at Ash's mercy."

That fake smile was going to be blown away in no time. *So, once again, good luck. You'll need it!*



It was my second day in the city. In the morning, all the students at the army academy were told to gather at the temple to attend lessons on how to read and write. I was looking forward to reading all the books in the temple, but I obviously did not want to learn reading and writing again—I had done that already three years ago.

When I asked Lord Arthur for advice, they reassured me, saying, "There will be other students who already know how to read and write, so they should be flexible. You'll probably get some free study time to read whatever you like."

"That would be splendid!"

I liked the sound of a syllabus adapted to each student's abilities.

In anticipation of the temple's library, I excitedly ran off. Lord Arthur trailed behind, since they were taken aback by my sudden sprint, but Lady Maika smoothly managed to keep up with my pace.

"We're lucky to get to go to the library already!" Lady Maika said.

"Yes! I did not expect in my wildest dreams that I was going to achieve my goal of visiting the temple library on my second day in the city."

First, I needed to find a book on the basics of chemistry and chemical engineering. Or maybe a guide on practical farming methods. My goal was to create a chemical fertilizer to increase food production.

"Will you help me too, Maika?"

"Of course! All I have to do is look for a book about fertilizers or compounds, right?"

"Yes! I expected nothing less from you."

Luckily, I had told her about what I was looking for before leaving the village. It was good to have an ally and friend whom I could rely on.

Finally catching up to us, Lord Arthur hesitantly joined the conversation. "I don't fully understand what you're talking about, but you are looking for a book?"

"Yes, exactly. I have some questions that the books in our village unfortunately could not answer."

"I see. That sounds interesting. Do you think I could be of any help to you?" Those were words of true friendship from Lord Arthur.

Welcome to the labor force.

As I showed them a broad grin, Lord Arthur recoiled for some reason. Grabbing their shoulder, Lady Maika tried explaining the situation with a strained smile.

"Don't be afraid. He's just grinning like that because he got excited."

"Oh... Thanks for telling me. He has a strangely intense smile..."

“Don’t worry, everyone says that at first.”

I wondered what exactly I had done wrong. I was only a bit excited and trying to be friendly.

At the temple, we were greeted by a beautiful and intelligent-looking woman who vaguely resembled Lady Maika and Mrs. Yuika. She had a calm demeanor and appeared to be around 20 years old.

“You two must be Maika and Ash,” she said. “It is my pleasure to meet you. I am Priest Yae. I will be one of your teachers at the academy.”

“The pleasure is on my side. I am Maika. I look forward to studying under your guidance.”

Standing next to Lady Maika, who had just formally greeted the priest in front of us, I felt a strange sense of affinity towards the latter. This was Mother Yae.

I felt a strong urge to thank her. “I am Ash. This is the first time we met in person, but thank you for all your help and assistance until now.”

“Oh, have we been in contact before?”

Mother Yae propped up her right cheek with her hand as she tilted her head to the side. Her gestures were quite charming.

“Yes, indirectly through Father Folke. I heard that you went through great efforts to search for a book that I wanted.”

“A book for Father Folke...” the smart-looking and beautiful woman opened her eyes wide in amazement. “You’re the young man whom Father Folke mentioned! You wanted to read such a difficult book?”

“I am afraid I do not remember which exact book it was. However, I do not think Father Folke would have been able to request such a book from anyone else.”

Slowly swaying, Mother Yae took a few steps backwards. “I’m feeling a bit dizzy...”

“Are you alright?”

Was she not feeling well? As I approached to look after her, Lady Maika grabbed my shoulder to stop me. “Don’t get closer! You’re the reason for her dizziness.”

What does that mean?

“The other villagers and I are already used to your behavior, but to someone who sees you for the first time, you can come off as overwhelming. You need to be careful.”

“You make it sound like I am some sort of hazard.”

“Not at all!” Flustered, Lady Maika denied my statement. I was glad to hear that I was not yet considered a toxic substance. “But my mom told me to make sure you don’t interact with anyone when you get fired up.”

That made it sound like I was a runaway car. *I guess I’m a hazard after all.*

I knew that I was an oddball, but was it really that bad?

As I was taking in this shock, Mother Yae recomposed herself. “Please excuse me. It’s just that you’re so much younger than I expected.”

“No, please excuse our Ash for startling you like this.” While I was still in shock, Lady Maika went into polite mode to apologize.

Wait, did she just say, “our Ash”? Am I now a property on top of being a hazard?

“Did Father Folke not write in the letter that Ash was a child?”

“No, he did mention that he had been threaten—asked by a child.”

Mother Yae took a good look at me. However, it felt like I was too far away and out of focus for her to make out any details.

“But I certainly did not expect him to be this young. I mean, he asked for a book whose contents no one here at the temple understands. And I had previously heard that he was a genius who had come across an essential clue in deciphering the language of the first period of ancient civilization.”

“Father Folke is exaggerating. After all, we are talking about Ash here!”

While casting skeptical glances at the bewildered Mother Yae, Lady Maika

seemed to be strangely happy.

As I wondered what had gotten into her, she quietly whispered into my ears. “As expected, you’re just as amazing here in the city. You really are our village’s finest.”

Am I a specialty export now?

Was that why I had been sent to the city? I did not realize Lady Maika and Mrs. Yuika were thinking of me that way.

“Is that so? You really are the young man Father Folke mentioned?” After persistently asking for confirmation, Mother Yae let out a sigh of exhaustion. “In that case, I guess you won’t need to learn how to read and write.”

“I agree. My father, the village chief, and my mother, his advisor, have also given him their stamp of approval. And while I am nowhere near as proficient as Ash, I also know how to read and write already,” Lady Maika said.

“Understood. Then it is decided. Both you and Ash will be exempt from the reading and writing lessons. You can use that time to consult whichever books you like. I hope you will broaden your knowledge and eventually contribute to the development of this city.”

“Thank you. I am certain Ash will not betray your expectations.”

Lady Maika had managed to push past Mother Yae’s doubts with an assertive, formal speech befitting a village chief’s daughter. I was glad, but at the same time, I could not fully rejoice—her previous statements were still ringing in my ears.

At that moment, Lord Arthur said to me, “Ash, what did they mean by ‘the deciphering of the ancient language’?”

“Oh, they were just talking about that time I helped with the deciphering of the language used in the early period of the ancient civilization.”

“You mean those letters that people can’t read anymore?”

“Yes, exactly.”

Lord Arthur’s beautiful face looked as if they had seen a ghost. “Ash... you might indeed be a bit overwhelming, just like Maika said.”

“I realize that I am a bit of an oddball, but there really is not that much to be surprised about. Please let me explain. It just so happens that Father Folke is a researcher of ancient languages and I helped him out a little.”

“Even so... I’ve seen those letters before, and I don’t think I could have helped out even in the slightest.”

Neither could I if it wasn’t for my past-life memories.

I was sure that if I had let them in on my secret they would have understood. But then they would have considered me even more of an oddball, so I just kept quiet. I felt my dilemma gradually increasing.

As I put on a strained smile, Lady Maika interfered. “Ash may be overwhelming, but he’s also a lot of fun. And if you spend time with him, more and more good things tend to happen.”

Her bright smile permeated to the depths of my heart. It seemed to have a similar effect on Lord Arthur as well, since their surprised face loosened up.

“You may be right there. I’ve never seen anyone like Ash before. Hehe, it does indeed seem like things are about to get fun.” Lord Arthur let out a charming, childlike chuckle. If only they had not been disguised as a boy, I would have loved to compliment them.

“I’m guessing the search for your book might also turn out to be quite the adventure,” Lord Arthur added.

“I am not so sure about that. I only want to manufacture something to help improve our agricultural practices.” *Don’t raise the bar so high. I’m not researching to impress anyone after all.*

“Don’t let your guard down, Arthur! A lot of things that Ash considers ordinary end up being quite amazing.”

“Hehe, I thought so.”

Lady Maika and Lord Arthur were both giggling. And while I was the subject of their laughter, I was the only one left out.

The temple’s library was indeed somewhat worthy of the title “library.”

However, it was still quite small, showing once again how precious books were in this world. It made me reconsider how vast the resources and advanced the technology of the libraries in my past life had been. One of my goals was to introduce libraries of that magnitude in this world too.

But first, it was necessary to secure ample food. Food was at the base of everything, including the advancement of civilization. As long as that foundation was not wide enough, you could only erect small pyramids.

At once, I asked Mother Yae regarding the organization of the library. “Are the books here sorted into different categories?”

“Yes, they are separated by their contents, such as history, geography, and literature... For the ones relating to technology, there might be some mix-ups, though, as they often cover wide areas of knowledge. Still, we are using a sorting method employed by the Church since ancient times.”

“Wonderful. In that case, the book I am searching for should be in the section for...”

I wanted to say natural sciences or chemistry, but that would have only led to confusion, like when I had asked Father Folke about them. There was no use relying on concepts that did not exist here.

“Is there a shelf dedicated to fields that prospered during the ancient civilization?”

Mother Yae thought to herself for a moment before shaking her head. “I’m afraid not. Those books are mostly just kept at the temple in the capital.”

“So you do not have any here?”

“Temples in regional cities and churches in villages prioritize the storing of books designated by the Church. It is said that most of them are pragmatic books helpful with the development of new settlements.”

The phrase “it is said that” seemed a bit ambiguous. And considering that the Church had existed for centuries, would there not have been a few success stories by now?

“Are there any records on settlements using those books as a foundation for

their development?”

“Yes, there are records and tales... Although they are rather old. For example, there are documents reporting that the foundation of the capital was built with the help of books provided by the Church.”

“I see.”

It made sense considering the books kept at the church in Noscula village. There was a useful botanical guide, the guide to practical farming, and many books on construction and smithing techniques.

Most likely, when the Church was established—or maybe even prior to that—they had made a list of “useful books” for new settlements. Back then it was probably an adequate list, but decades later, after the rise and fall of countless cities and villages, the foundations needed for those books to be useful (knowledge, resources, equipment) had been lost.

The names of the chemicals and the refining process mentioned in the farming guide, which had frustrated me so much, fell into that same category. Things that used to be commonplace had gradually become less accessible and, as a consequence, were lost. As such, the priest’s statement, “it is said that,” was honest and accurate.

When I communicated those impressions to Mother Yae, she enthusiastically nodded along. “I feel like you are onto something. The Church was only able to obtain as much power as it holds right now because it provided essential help for the development of settlements. However, now that they have failed to adapt to the current situation, people are starting to have doubts regarding the Church’s teachings. It makes sense.”

It seemed that there were differing opinions concerning the future of the Church’s teachings among the clergy. In this world, the Church was not only a religious institution, but also an educational institution in charge of keeping and maintaining the books. In other words, it was an entity resembling an honest and conscientious scholar—that was its best trait.

“Maybe it would be better to update the list of books that are distributed to each area,” Mother Yae suggested.

“If the doctrine allows for such a change, that would probably be for the best. But would such a drastic change be possible for a religious organization like the Church?”

After I voiced my concerns, Mother Yae smiled gently. “Since it is a large organization, it won’t happen overnight. However, the Church’s teachings are said to originate from a fellow priest; a fellow human. They are based on the wisdom of ancient civilization. Therefore, it is not blasphemous or insolent to rack our brains trying to figure out a way to carry over that wisdom to the future.”

The priest’s speech was worthy of a guardian of wisdom like her. She had the will to protect the books and preserve their wisdom for future generations.

“Please allow me to express my deepest respect for that magnificent statement. As someone born in a remote farming village, I hope to obtain new wisdom from you and the Church’s teachings as much as possible.”

“Since that is the Church’s duty, I will gladly impart my wisdom to you.”

It was refreshing to see how she replied to my words of encouragement with such delight. I felt like I was among kindred spirits. Starting with Father Folke, it seemed that I got along well with the priests whom I encountered in this world.

“I will also do my best to assist the Church! Since you said that there are practical guides, I think I will start by looking for a book about farming!” I said enthusiastically.

After I proclaimed my intention to effectively use the temple, I turned around to see Lady Maika and Lord Arthur. The latter wore a solemn expression on their face.

“Ash, I have a feeling this is pointless, but I’ll go ahead and say it anyway.” I wondered what it was. “I think it’s very odd to be as calm and unconcerned as you when raising questions about the Church’s teachings.”

I was not calm; I just pretended to be. How could an 11-year-old child have known that a little suggestion like that would turn into a discussion about religion? I was breaking into a cold sweat on the inside. But it was not like I had committed a crime, so I should not worry too much.

Following the above train of thought, I replied with a line probably indicative of my true feelings. “Rather than worrying about that, let us get started on looking for the right book. I have waited long enough to set foot in here.”

Even Lady Maika gave me a look of resignation, as if I was beyond all hope.

Arthur's Perspective

“The books relating to farming are up on this shelf.”

After Mother Yae had proposed to help show us around, Ash's expression kept frantically changing as he looked up the bookshelves.

First, it was a childlike smile, as if he met with friends for whom he had been waiting impatiently. It was quite cute. Soon, that smile started to cloud in doubt. He had a sad look on his face, as if he was disappointed by the low turnout. It made me want to give him a pat on the back. Finally, he squinted with the expression of a dangerous beast ready to latch onto its prey at any moment. *I have to admit that that look paired with his smile makes him look frightening...*

“I see... I guess there are not many more books even at the heart of the region... Well, for now, this should do...”

It looked like Ash had declared someone—or rather something—his enemy.

Wait a minute. How was it possible for someone to express so much tension just from looking up at a bookshelf? *I'm not the only one who finds this odd, right?*

Everything about it was strange, from the fact that a child like Ash was letting off a threatening aura to the fact that it was directed at a bookshelf. *What's happening? Who or what is Ash?*

In my confusion, I directed my gaze towards his long-time friend to watch her reaction.

“Ash, I found a stool.”

She set up the stool for Ash to grab the books off the shelf with a calm expression on her face.

“Thank you, Maika.”

“Hehe, don’t worry about it! I’ll hold down the stool.”

Maika looked delighted as she observed Ash climbing on the stool and grabbing books. This wasn’t normal, right? Or was I just too naive?

I sent a look over to Mother Yae, who seemed to be just as confused as I was. So it wasn’t just me who thought something was off. Either me and Mother Yae or Ash and Maika were the odd ones. I would have placed my bet on the latter.

“Looking at the titles, I think we should start with these ones for now.” Ash was holding four books as he came down the ladder. “Maika, can you take a look at this one?”

“Yes!” Maika took the book and headed towards one of the reading tables.

“What should I do?” I asked.

“Wait a moment, Arthur. I will scan through them and mark the parts that seem interesting.”

Ash started flipping through one of the books.

“Hm... There is nothing about fertilizing the ground, but maybe there is some information on how to plant and raise crops and vegetables... Ah, right here.”

He put the open book in front of me.

“Could you please read this part? It would be great if you could briefly summarize the contents for me after you are done. I am looking for anything relating to compost, fertilizers, and agrochemicals.”

“O-Okay?”

Cold sweat started running down my face when I skimmed through the text. I was supposed to read this? It was ten times—no, more like a hundred times more difficult than I had expected. I had received a good education and studied as hard as possible, but even so, this book was beyond my abilities.

“Are there any unfamiliar terms?” Seeing me freeze, Ash sat down next to me.

“S-Sorry. There are so many words I don’t know...”

“That is natural. I imagine there are a lot of words unfamiliar to someone of your standing. It is a book about agriculture after all. And on top of that, many of the terms in here are no longer in use or differ from their current use.”

“I see. That makes me feel a little relieved.”

Listen, Ash. While I get that, as someone who grew up in a farmer village, you would have a better understanding of agriculture in general, how do you possibly know those terms that are no longer in use?

“How about we read it together for now? Once you familiarize yourself with the basic terms of farm work and the names of the tools, you should be able to quickly get the hang of it.”

“Thanks. Sorry for taking up your time.”

I had intended to help Ash, but instead I was holding him back.

As I ducked my head in guilt and shame, Ash spoke very naturally in a warm tone. “There is no need to apologize. I should be the one thanking you since you are helping me out.”

“But...”

As I tried to convey that I was taking up his time, he just deflected my concerns with a smile.

“Come, let us start reading. Have you done farm work before? Probably not, right? So we need to start with the basics. That is great! Learning new things is always fun, so let us enjoy ourselves lots!”

He looked to be enjoying himself more than me.

“This describes how to plow the fields. It tells you how fine or firm the soil must be and how much you need to pile up. There are differences depending on the crops.”

His smile kept pushing my bewildered self along.

“Oh, this must be an old expression for ‘onions.’ I have seen this before in one of the cooking books at the church in my village. Therefore, this must be advice on how to raise onions. Do you like onions?”

This was the first time I had this much fun while being pushed along.

“Ah, this is it! I found a section on compost! I want to know how to make and use this!” Ash embraced the book with glistening eyes.

Hey, now I can't see the text anymore.

But I didn't mind. I enjoyed myself just looking at Ash's happy face. So this was what it felt like to have a friend. You enjoyed yourself even if you were bewildered or just observing. It warmed my heart.

“Look, Ash! There was a similar description here! Are they talking about pigs?” Maika joined the conversation.

“Really? Let me see!”

As soon as Maika called out to Ash, he rushed over to her. Suddenly, I felt cold as I saw them talking about some difficult concepts next to each other with their shoulders touching. *I guess this feeling is also part of being friends*, I thought.

“The city library is something else after all! I can get my hands on promising new books so easily! This gives me hope for other fields too! Next, I should try looking into medicine and engineering-related ones!”

After Ash had proclaimed his excitement, Maika raised her fist, yelling, “Let's do our best!”

It was impressive how she managed to keep up with Ash's pace. At the same time, I was still trailing behind. At least for now. Eventually, I wanted to catch up to them. After all, we were friends.

Chapter 2: Paper Is Firewood for Words

My first excursion to the city library concluded with a promising outlook. Unfortunately, though, time had run out before I could get a closer look, so I pleaded with Mother Yae to borrow some of the books, but sadly she refused on grounds of their strict rules. I realized that the scarcity and resulting high value of books was a problem. The diffusion of letterpress printing may have been a higher priority than I had initially thought.

However, currently my schedule was already filled up, the top priority being agricultural development. There were so many things I wanted to do that I was overwhelmed and overjoyed at the same time. *It feels as if I'm playing a simulation game. Well, a very old analog one.*

Mother Yae told us that in the afternoon there was going to be a class on military affairs in the temple's study room.

"I guess that is to be expected at an army academy," I said.

"Yes, this city is a strategic military base for the whole region, so it is important to maintain adequate defense capabilities. Besides, it is also necessary for each village to have the capabilities for a minimum of self-defense," Mother Yae explained.

"Does that mean the real purpose of our studies here is to train us as future commanders?"

In other words, this was a full-fledged military school, or maybe "cadet school" would have been the more appropriate term.

In Noscula village, the village chief was supposed to lead the young men into the fight in case of an emergency. Contrary to his gentle appearance when he was flirting with Mrs. Yuika, Mr. Klein was incredibly strong. After the Sir Bear incident, and once my trip to the city had been decided, I had learned this firsthand when he taught me the basics of military arts and combat. If he had not been away on a business trip, I definitely would not have needed to fight Sir

Bear and almost die in the process. I would not have been surprised to hear that he had killed a bear with his bare hands before.

Mother Yae showed a strained laugh. “Ash, I assume that you would prefer to spend your time doing research like earlier rather than learning about military affairs.”

I see you’ve gotten to know me quite well already in this short amount of time. “I realize the importance of our defense capabilities, but if you ask me which one I prefer...”

My main objective was still to obtain books and resources unavailable in the village.

Surprisingly, Mother Yae responded with a look of approval. “Seeing your enthusiasm from earlier, I’m also thinking you would be better off devoting your time to library research. I’m expecting you to accomplish great things for the good of society.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” Lord Arthur added with a slightly tired expression. “I thought I’d received a good education, but Ash is putting me to shame.”

“I appreciate both your help. Thanks to you I was able to make the best out of our limited time.”

I meant it. Mother Yae as well as Lord Arthur had been an outstanding help. While the latter was not familiar with the subject at first, they were fast to learn and ready to help after several hints. That was nothing short of brilliant.

“You’re definitely suited to be a researcher, Ash. I also had a lot of fun learning new things,” Lord Arthur remarked.

Lady Maika, however, seemed to disagree with both of them. “I think Ash should also study military affairs,” she said. While the other two were puzzled, she continued. “I’ve got a feeling that the villagers would prefer Ash to take command rather than me.”

Really?

“After all, you’re the *Bearkiller*,” she added.

Maybe you’re right.

But I did not think that they preferred me over Lady Maika. It was just that the villagers had started calling me “the Bearkiller” from time to time after my fight with Sir Bear. Imagine someone shouting, “Follow the Bearkiller’s orders!” Undoubtedly, any bandit would feel instantly nervous, and any allies would feel relieved at the prospect of such a strong commander. It was the perfect bluff. In the end, Sir Bear had gifted me a powerful new name after he died. And a fur coat.

“The Bearkiller?”

“Yeah, there was an incident at the village!” Lady Maika melancholically shook her head.

I’m sorry for making you worry back then.

Lord Arthur looked like they wanted to ask about the incident, but our small talk was cut short by Mother Yae excitedly greeting the person who had just entered the study room.

“Sir George!”

“Ms. Yae, long time no see. I look forward to working alongside you as a teacher from today on,” the man replied to the loud voice which was in stark contrast with Mother Yae’s intellectual aura.

“O-Oh, yes. D-Don’t hesitate to ask if you need anything.”

The beautiful and intelligent woman was faltering. It seemed that Mother Yae was still a young maiden at heart.

The young man at the end of her passionate gaze was in his twenties. Judging from the title “Sir” and his robust physique, he must have been a knight in active duty. Strangely, his face seemed familiar, even though we had never met before.

“Ash, that must be him.”

“Who?”

I did not know to whom Lady Maika was referring. She gave me a strange look in return.

“I’m talking about your distant uncle.”

“Oh... I am not sure about that. Why do you think that?”

“He looks just like you!”

“Really?” *There’s no way.*

Sir George was a handsome man with masculine features. I was supposed to be related to a guy like him? Did we really look alike? *I’d be over the moon if it was true, but could it really be?*

Sir George started scratching his head when he noticed my impolite stare. “Please forgive my rudeness. Have we met somewhere before?” he asked me.

“I have never left my village before, so I do not think so.”

“I see, please forgive me. I was under the impression that I had seen you somewhere before. My name is Baleas George and I will be one of your teachers here at the army academy for the foreseeable future. I am also a knight.”

“Oh!” I exclaimed.

Lady Maika was right after all. I had heard the name Baleas before.

“Please excuse my late introduction. I am Ash from Noscula village.”

“Ash? From Noscula?”

It looked like Sir George had also heard my name before. Reflexively, we both stared at each other. So this was my relative who had managed to ascend from a farmer family without a last name to the rank of knight. This was my distant uncle whom everyone took pride in.

“It is a pleasure to meet you, Sir George.”

“The pleasure is mine, Ash. But now it’s time for class.”

“Yes, let us talk again at a later date.”

Sir George let out a sound of surprise as if to acknowledge my decorum.

“Very well. Everyone, please take your seats. We will start class now!” His commanding voice silenced the slightly noisy classroom instantly.

That was my first interaction with my distant uncle. The biggest takeaway

were Mother Yae's young maiden-like eyes when she looked at Sir George. She was a librarian at the city temple and had the authority to loan books. I did not really know my uncle, but I had heard that he was single. I was ready to get involved and do everything in my might to make them both happy. And I believed kindness should ultimately be rewarded with kindness.

Sir George's lesson was more interesting than expected. Since he talked about military equipment, I was able to gauge the technology level of the city. It seemed that he was quite familiar with the logistics involved in the management and supply of equipment. In addition, he gave off a deeply sincere and meticulous impression, possibly making him someone I could entrust with my finances.

As we returned to the dormitory, it was time to prepare dinner. The second day in the city kept on going.

"Here at the dormitory we have to take turns cooking dinner. Although, in reality, that just means we need to help our resident cook." Both Maika and I nodded along to the explanation of our dorm senior, Lord Arthur.

"It's supposed to be practice so you can survive on your own if you ever find yourself alone on an expedition," he continued. That was reasonable. "Unless there are any special circumstances, the shifts are split up by rooms. In other words, Ash and I would be one group, Maika and Reina another, and so on. Today both our groups will be in charge of dinner. I'm sorry it's your turn so soon after your arrival, but Reina and I had been exempt from duty until now because we didn't have a roommate."

Lady Maika and I looked at each other.

"Don't worry about it."

"I guess it is our turn then."

Besides, judging from last night's excellent dinner and this morning's delicious breakfast, the cook seemed to know what they were doing. I looked forward to learning how to cook ingredients exclusive to the city.

"Let us get started then! Our stomachs will start grumbling if we do not hurry

up!”

“Mine’s already grumbling from all the work today.”

While Lady Maika and I walked ahead with a light step, Lord Arthur and Lady Reina observed us from behind.

“It looks like they’ll be able to cook well enough.”

“Yes, luckily they are both quite reliable.”

It almost sounded as if neither of them had stood in a kitchen before. I exchanged glances with Lady Maika. We needed to be careful.

The kitchen was finer than any I had encountered in our village. It was spacious enough to accommodate a large number of people and there were several stoves. I could even make out some stone materials in its structure. It looked like the stoves were made out of clay stuck on top of a skeleton of stone. In that case, they should have just used stones all the way, but I suspected it was a scarce material.

“Our newbies are here!”

The man was lording it over us as if he was going to proclaim himself king of the kitchen. He had a robust physique, but the cut covering up his right eye made him seem more like a bandit chief than a kitchen king.

He barked at us, saying, “I don’t care who ya are or where ya from. The only thing that counts in my kitchen is whether ya can cook or not. I’ll treat ya as my apprentices and if ya don’t like that, make me a better meal! Got it?”

It looked like Lord Arthur and Lady Reina, who both came from affluent families, were taken aback by his lecture, but they nodded in agreement. They were not the types to misuse their borrowed authority, but even putting that aside, they probably would not have been able to say anything faced with that menacing look. Even Lady Maika, who usually was not shy at all, only silently nodded. As for me, I was able to calmly reply, since I had built up a resistance to fear and menaces thanks to the last moments of my past life.

“Yes, Chef! My name is Ash. I look forward to helping you!”

“That’s the spirit! As ya can see, I’m the cook. The name’s Yacoo!”

“Understood, Chef Yacoo!”

He did not look like a cook at all, but I was willing to believe his word. The other three missed the chance to introduce themselves, but Chef Yacoo did not care. As he had said at the start, it did not matter who we were.

“Give ya hands a good wash. We’ll get started right away. Be quick but careful!”

“Yes, Chef Yacoo!” This time Lady Maika answered too.

While we washed our hands using the water jug, Chef Yacoo took out a round lump from the ashes of the stove.

“Chef Yacoo, what is that?”

“That’s ya first job. Ya probably should start with washing veggies or something, but for my recipe, this comes first.”

After dusting off the round lump, it revealed a burnt leaf which he handed to me.

“Oh, I see! There is something wrapped inside. Is this roasted food?”

However, it had already cooled down. He must have cooked it inside the stove in the morning.

“Don’t be stupid! This is only pre-cooked. We gonna chop up the inside.”

He used his rough fingers to gently peel off the leaf of another lump. I followed his lead and uncovered an onion inside. It was golden brown—it had been thoroughly cooked.

“Are you saying we will chop up this?”

“Ay. Cut it in half like this.”

As he continued to chop it up into half circles, I asked him about today’s menu, expecting to be impressed again.

“Impatient, aren’t ya? We’re making a chicken and vegetable milk soup. It’s delicious and also full of vitamins for growing lads like ya.”

How wonderful! “How wonderful!” I was so impressed that my inner thoughts slipped out of my mouth.

“Oh, ya like milk soup?”

“Of course, I am glad that we are getting a delicious meal, but I am even more impressed by your wonderful cooking methods!”

With this technique, you could expect the same result as simmering onions and carrots after frying them first. According to my past-life memories, I also used to fry my ingredients whenever possible to give them more flavor. Back then, I did not mind that it took a little bit longer, but it was different in this world. Here, you had to worry about not wasting the firewood.

However, with Chef Yacoo’s method, it was possible to recreate that same process while limiting the firewood necessary. He roasted the onion in the same fire that he used to cook a different food, saving both time and fuel.

“Your food is not only delicious, but you also manage to save resources!”

“Ya know whatcha talking about, laddie!”

“I have learned a wonderful new method! That is a very smart way of roasting the onions. It allows for a rich flavor in the soup and sauce.”

He was an excellent chef. In order to use his time and effort on the important things, he had devised a way to save time preparing the ingredients.

Damn! How did I not come up with this idea? I could’ve made so many more delicious meals back in the village! I felt frustration building up inside me for only making amber onions on special occasions such as the Spring Festival because I did not want to waste any firewood.

Hearing my words of praise coming from my slightly-annoyed self, Chef Yacoo boasted with a content look on his face. “I’m glad ya understand how amazing my cooking is! Ya grew up on a farm, right?”

“Yes, I am the son of a farmer. I have received special permission to study here in the city.”

“That’s great, laddie. I can teach ya lots of other things! Make sure to take notes!”

“Yes, Chef!”

I started chopping up well-roasted vegetables next to Chef Yacoo. Now that I

knew how skilled he was, I had to pay attention to his every single move.

Beside me, Lady Maika dropped her shoulders as she picked up the kitchen knife. “I can’t believe that you get this fired up even in the kitchen. I’m sorry, Mom, Ash’s too difficult to handle...”

Don’t worry about my difficulty! Just make sure to study his cooking methods! Arthur and Reina, you too! Don’t just stand there, come and help prepare dinner! Ah, no! Don’t hold the knife with your fist closed! Stretch out your index finger as support! Take the knife in your strong hand and hold down the ingredients with the other. Don’t hurry, Arthur! I’m scared just looking at you. Be calm and careful, even if it takes a little longer. Don’t put anything other than the onions on the extension line of the knife; you might end up cutting your finger.

“Where did ya learn to teach like that, laddie? Looks like I don’t even need to be here.”

Apparently, I had said some of that out loud.

“You are flattering me. I have a little bit of experience from teaching two other people back in my village.”

One of them, my best pupil Lady Maika, was nimbly chopping up the vegetables, showing how much she had progressed.

“I wouldn’t be able to do this without your help, Ash.”

“Not at all. I just gave you a little help. You already knew how to cook before I taught you.”

The other person was Jigil, who was also not completely inexperienced, as he was living with only his sister. I had just taught him some hunter meals from Ban.

“Ya so small but ya can already teach. That’s something else. Missy, how’s this laddie’s food taste?”

“It’s very popular in our village. Whenever someone got a hold of nice ingredients like butter or wheat flour, they would usually have Ash make them a meal.”

Mrs. Yuika's cooking was also extremely delicious, but the villagers were probably too shy to ask the chief's wife to cook for them. Besides, I knew some unusual dishes thanks to my past-life memories.

"By the way, missy, what's the best thing he cooked?"

"The best? Hm... He cooks a lot of unusual dishes, so I'm not entirely sure..."

She looked up at the ceiling while thinking. After gulping once, she suddenly opened her eyes wide. "It has to be the Hamburg steak!"

That was my trump card when cooking for growing children with a good appetite! I had hoped she would say so.

"Hamburg? Hey, laddie, what's that?"

"I guess it is a sort of meatloaf. Do you know what that is?"

"Hm. What meat ya using? Any special ingredients?"

How can I explain a Hamburg steak?

As Chef Yacoo and I started a philosophical discussion about meat while continuing to prepare dinner, Lady Maika let out a long sigh while continuing to cut up vegetables.

"Stop talking about it—I'm getting hungry. I really want to eat your Hamburg steak now," she said.

Since that feeling was mutual, I replied with a broad grin.

We were allocated some holidays as students, and during those, self-catering was recommended. In the city, it was also easy to obtain common livestock meats such as pork or beef. Moreover, I still had a regular cash income. In short, all that meant that I could cast a spell to put a big smile on Lady Maika's face.

"How about we make one together next time? Here we can easily buy pork or beef, and there is a wider variety of seasonings. We should make the most of that and cook an extra delicious Hamburg steak!"

"Really?! Let's do it as soon as possible!"

"Yes, we need to go check out the market to see what ingredients they have."

"Wait, laddie." The bandit chief-like chef interrupted our pleasant holiday

planning. “If ya need pork or beef, I’ll introduce ya to the mansion’s butcher. They’re sly foxes over at the market. And if ya get unlucky, it might be dangerous too. I’ll tell ya a good place for seasonings as well.”

“Oh, I greatly appreciate that. Since I am a farm boy, I am not familiar with the ways of the city yet.”

As I already said back at the temple, I firmly believed that kindness should be repaid with kindness. And since Chef Yacoo had just shown me kindness, now it was my turn to return it.

“Would you like a Hamburg steak as a thank you?”

“Ah, ya cut right to it! I like ya, laddie!” Chef Yacoo was smirking like a scoundrel.

Lord Arthur and Lady Reina, who had been completely left out in the cold, looked longingly towards us.

If you help grinding the meat, I’ll make your portions too.

Ten days had passed since I came to the city. Luckily, there were still many books left to discover at the temple library, and I had managed to gather the necessary knowledge regarding fertilizers from the ones I read. I now knew several methods to make fertilizer from scratch. I owed a great deal to the brilliant Mother Yae and Lord Arthur for their help.

“Now we know what the difficulties will be.” I spoke in a solemn manner with both my elbows resting on the table in the dining hall.

“What are they, Ash?” Lady Maika seemed to enjoy keeping me company. It was good to have a fellow student who knew me as well as she did.

“First, let us go over the positives. The review of the literature stored at the temple is progressing smoothly. Mother Yae and Lord Arthur are also lending a hand, but I feel like your assistance has been especially helpful so far. Thank you.”

“I’m glad I could be of help to you, hehe.”

As I expressed my sincere gratitude, Lady Maika started smiling as if she had been charmed. She must have been over the moon that her skills were at an

advanced level even in the city.

“As a result, we now know several methods to create fertilizers that can be used on the fields. I want to start making them right away and test them as soon as they are done.”

“You mean like your experiments in the fields back at the village?”

“Exactly. However, this is where it starts getting tricky.”

Before we could even get started, we needed to gather the right materials, as well as safe equipment for the fertilizer production and a storage area. Still, even if we managed to produce the fertilizer somehow, there was no field where we could have conducted the tests.

“In short, the problem is that we are outsiders in this city. We need the help of various other people before we can get started,” I concluded.

“Oh, right. In the village, we never had to worry about that.”

“Yes, thankfully the village chief was on board from the beginning, and graciously provided me with everything I needed.”

I was really glad that I had become friends with Lady Maika. And I could not stress enough how grateful I was that Mrs. Yuika had taken my suggestions seriously from the beginning. *Please keep on collaborating and I'll keep on thanking you.*

“So, we have to find allies first. Besides, networking is one of the goals of our stay here.”

“Yeah, it's very important to make connections!” Lady Maika said. After she enthusiastically agreed with me, she tilted her head to the side. Behind her cute mannerisms, she was a pragmatic thinker. “But whom should we target and how?”

“I am not sure myself either.”

At our dormitory, it was easy to befriend children of our age. Thinking ahead, those might have become valuable connections in the future, once they assumed powerful positions. However, that was irrelevant to our current situation. Regardless, it could have still been beneficial to be on good terms

with them, since many of their parents were holding influential positions at present.

“Anyway, we should start making fertilizer as soon as possible. According to my research, it will take a while to produce it, so the sooner we start the better.”

Apparently, it took a month even to make something relatively simple, and several years to get the most effective kind, which I wanted. However, since I was in a bit of a hurry in this world, I could not really afford to stand by for that long. I felt like I did not have the time to choose my preferred way. Or maybe I did not have to choose?

“Ash? I feel like you’re getting fired up again.”

“Oh, really?”

I was not aware of it, but I trusted Lady Maika’s judgment. I had to be careful when taking action. Presumed shortcuts often end up being detours.

“Anyway, we should of course befriend the other students at the academy, but for now, I want to focus on people outside. Ideally, my first choice would be the acting count Lord Itsuki...”

The acting count was extremely busy, so there was not really any time to impose myself. It seemed that, while he himself wanted to talk with his niece Lady Maika, his schedule was beyond his control. Accordingly, it was highly unlikely that I could have enticed him even if I used Lady Maika as a bait. Besides, no busy person would have wanted to talk even more business during their time off work. Therefore, it was clearly still too soon to engage in direct negotiations with Lord Itsuki. Until the opportunity presented itself, I had to focus on removing any obstacles in the way. I needed to put myself in a position where it was impossible for him to refuse my proposals.

“As we have currently no direct shot at the general, we must aim for the soldiers in shooting range.”

“It’s like the saying, ‘If you want to shoot the general, first shoot his horse!’”

Exactly. And if we keep shooting, with any luck, a stray arrow might even end up hitting the general.

“Where do you want to start then?” Lady Maika asked.

“Well, Reina’s mother is the dorm supervisor...”

Lady Reina’s mother was a waiting lady for the Count’s family, holding the positions of secretary and dorm supervisor. With the prospects of following in her mother’s footsteps, Lady Reina excelled more than other students at the academy. She was definitely someone I wanted to have as a friend and ally, even disregarding her parents’ standing. If I got closer to her, I was eventually going to get through to her mother. My goal was to receive permission to conduct my experiments in the dormitory’s garden or in the kitchen garden.

“Getting closer to Reina and her mother should be our main objective for now as we settle into city life. What do you think?” I proposed.

“Hm... I don’t really have an answer. Honestly, I don’t know if that plan is good, but I don’t have any other suggestions either.” I could not blame her. This was not my first choice either. “But your plans have always worked out until now, so I’m sure it’ll be alright this time around too. I’ll help however I can!”

“Thank you. I was counting on you saying that.”

Lady Maika was good at inspiring people and pushing them beyond their limits. I felt relieved and motivated by the encouragement from someone like her, who had always supported me. She looked like a young Mrs. Yuika in my eyes.

“You are a wonderful woman.”

The talented Mrs. Yuika’s beloved daughter rapidly stood up from her seat with a glowing red face. “Y-Y-You can count on me!!”

“Thank you!”

“A-Alright! How about we go talk to Reina now? I’ll make sure she’s going to join us! If she refuses, I’ll find a way to exploit her weaknesses...”

What a comedic talent! She even made sure to lower her voice for the last sentence. Although the performance was so convincing that it almost seemed as if she meant it for real...

“Calm down, Maika. It is going to be alright. Now *you* are getting a little fired

up.” *You shouldn’t threaten people so easily.*

“Oh, really? I just don’t want your plan to fail.”

“Me neither, but you do not have to rush ahead like that. It should work out in the end.”

Intimidation was supposed to be a last resort. Of course, since I was a gentleman, I had never threatened anyone, nor did I plan to do so in the future. Although I was willing to murmur sentences that could have been interpreted as threats. Before resorting to intimidation, we should try out another method just as effective.

“By the way, Maika, do you see the kitchen over there?” I asked.

As she turned towards the kitchen, her eyes started glimmering with the utmost anticipation. “Yes!”

“And can you see the wheat flour that Chef Yacoo shared with us?”

“Yes!!”

“Not to forget, there is also cream, sugar, jam, honey, and apples in the pantry.”

“Yes!!!”

She had the sweet tooth of a young maiden.

Compared to the village, here in the city there were so many more ingredients available. It was like a different world. One of the villages in the vicinity of the Sacula urban area specialized in the cultivation of fruits. Consequently, apples, astringent persimmons, peaches, and strawberries were common here.

“Today we will use those ingredients and make a special dish for Reina in order to persuade her.”

Rather than threatening her, I was going to try offering her a little present. Or, as some might have said, I was going to “bribe” her. That seemed like a more peaceful route.

“I volunteer as a taster! We need to make sure the dish is good enough to

persuade her!”

You could see her mother’s character shine through as Lady Maika splendidly came up with a pretext for her own desire to eat. I was proud of her growth. And, since I wanted to eat too, I happily went along with it.

“You are right. If it does not taste good, we might end up achieving the opposite and leave a bad impression. Please give me your honest opinion!”

“Yay! Judging from the ingredients, it looks like you’re planning to make a dessert, right? What do you want to make?”

“Today, I want to make a sweet called crepe. It is a sweet version of the galette.”

The galette itself was a relatively commonplace dish here. However, it was eaten as a main course, since the dough was made with salt and water. Not even Chef Yacoo knew about the sweet version, made with milk and sugar mixed into the dough.

Sugar and jam were usually reserved for fluffy breads, such as deep-fried bread topped in sugar. I liked that too, but at times it was too greasy, and it had a very monotonous sweet taste.

Hehehe. This was my chance to catch them off guard with my special dessert. I wondered if they were going to be able to keep their cool when faced with the harmonious combination of the faint sugary taste of the dough, the strong sweet flavor of the sugar and honey, and the sourness of the apple and jam.

“Judging from your face, it looks like we’re in for a treat!”

What did my face look like? Was I drooling?

It was done! The spirit-meddling chemical substance called crepe!

I cut it up into smaller slices and prepared a multi-colored plate by adding jam, cream, honey, and apples. *And there’s no bloodshed involved, so you can eat it up with your mind at ease!*

Both Lady Maika and Chef Yacoo, who I had given a taste sample as a thanks for letting me use the firewood and ingredients, had said it was “the best.” They

didn't say anything else, but it appeared to be heartfelt praise. Chef Yacoo added that he wanted to know the recipe, so he could incorporate it into his menu for the dormitory. I was more than happy to oblige and give him all the recipes I knew. I could not wait to see how a professional could improve them.

We loaded our secret weapon onto a tray and headed towards Lady Maika and Lady Reina's shared room.

"Oh, what a surprise. If it isn't Maika and Ash," Lady Reina greeted us.

"May we enter?" As a gentleman, I could not enter the room without asking.

She gave me permission with a nod. "Please come in. Have you two been enjoying the break?"

"Yes, very much!" Lady Maika, who was in high spirits from eating my new dessert, replied with a sunny smile.

Lady Reina seemed surprised at her enthusiastic answer. "Did something good happen to you?"

"Yes, something extremely good! And I would love to share it with you."

As I held out the tray and lifted the cloth, a sweet smell filled the room. Lady Reina's serious expression immediately loosened up.

"This smells great... But I have never seen this sweet before. What is it?"

"We'll explain later, just take a bite for now!" Lady Maika invited her.

"What? Really? But..." Her eyes sparkled from joy before she rapidly withdrew her extended hand.

Oh? Looks like she won't walk into our trap so easily. "What is wrong? It is safe to eat them. Chef Yacoo tasted them too."

"Oh, no, I believe you. But my mother warned me not to accept gifts too easily."

Oh? Her mother was a formidable opponent already. But I wondered if there was any woman who could have resisted this sweet smell. Lady Reina's eyes were already fixed on the crepes. It was charming to see how she tried to resist the urge to look and shook her head whenever she gave in. Her seriousness was

quite lovely too.

“I see. You have a wonderful mother. If I remember correctly, she is the supervisor of this dormitory?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“In that case, she may be right to worry. It is not unthinkable that some scoundrels would appear who want to curry favors from your mother by getting close to you.”

“Yes, my mother said the same thing. Such misguided fellows definitely exist.”

“Yes, indeed.” *Right in front of your eyes.*

Lady Maika’s smile looked a little wooden. *Don’t make it so obvious!*

“You should probably also be careful, Maika. You are a relative of the count after all.”

“Ah... Uhm... Yes, that’s right.”

This interaction hopefully made it seem like Lady Maika’s stiff face was due to her reflecting on her own position. In addition, it showed that there was no need for me to bribe Lady Reina, since I was already friends with Lady Maika. Now it was all up to Lady Reina whether or not she would see through our act.

“Well, I understand your concerns. Your attitude and your decision to not even accept sweets is admirable.”

I felt so from the bottom of my heart. I wished more pure and unselfish people like her would become politicians.

“Thank you, I am glad you understand. You act very mature.”

“You think so too, Reina? Ash’s always been like this since I’ve known him.”

I *did* feel from the bottom of my heart that Lady Reina’s attitude was admirable, but I wanted to bribe her no matter what, so...

“Then it seems that, unfortunately, I can no longer give this to you.”

When I let out a greatly exaggerated sigh, Lady Reina reluctantly looked at the fresh crepes.

“Yes, I’m afraid so. I will ask my mother if it’s okay to receive things like this in the future... They look really delicious.” She took a gulp.

Yes, they are delicious. You want to eat them, right? Hehe. “Unfortunately, if I cannot share them with you, I will have to get rid of them.”

“If you’re gonna throw them away, then give them to—”

I covered Lady Maika’s mouth with my left hand before she was able to say anything counterproductive.

“However, since I went through the effort of making them myself, and I used up valuable sugar and butter, it would be a waste to just throw them away. Would you not agree, Reina?”

“Yes... And since you cooked them, I assume you used up firewood too?”

“Exactly. I am sure your mother would also disapprove of such a senseless waste.”

“Do you think so? But you may be right. She is quite strict with those things...”

In that case, I guess there’s only one thing for you to do. “Reina, would you help us dispose of the crepes?”

“What do you mean?”

I used her confusion to once again present her with the crepes.

“Do not think of it as a present. You are merely helping us deal with the leftovers.”

“Are you sure... it’s alright?”

“Do not worry. If you are not eating them, they will get thrown out. I do not expect anything in return.” *It might just so happen that you will want to be on good terms with me if you ever want to eat them again.*

As I stretched out the tray towards her, the aroma twisting around her nose, her self-control finally broke and she capitulated.

“In that case... I guess it’s alright?”

“Go ahead.” *While I have many ulterior motives, there is no ill will. Rest assured while you walk into my trap.*

“Thank you. I will try them then.”

She pinched a small crepe with her slender fingers. The moment that she put it in her mouth, it was game over for the overly-serious girl.

“This is—”

Her eyes opened up wide and her body was tingling from excitement.

She remained completely still for about five seconds with her eyes sparkling while chewing before she finally spoke. “Delicious!!!”

The last time I had heard such an energetic “delicious” must have been in a gourmet cooking show on television in my past life.

“What is this? It’s so sweet. But I love it! This is the first time I’m eating anything like it!”

“I am glad it is to your liking. Since throwing it away would be a waste, you can eat as much as you want.”

“Thanks! This one tastes different?! Oh, there’s strawberries inside... And this one tastes like apple... And here’s one filled with honey!”

Surrender confirmed—mission complete.

While I was hiding my smile, next to me Lady Maika was celebrating the victory with a sinister smile. *Be a little more subtle.*

Fortunately, it seemed that Lady Reina was too focused on the crepe to notice anything around her.



We had successfully broken through her first barrier. At this rate, we would slowly get closer and eventually I could also entice her mother with samples of desserts that were unusual in this world.

Later on, I also gave some of the leftover crepes to Lord Arthur, who had been absent as they were spending the holiday back home at the mansion. Immediately after taking a bite, Lord Arthur let out a girly scream.

In any world there was nothing cuter than the expression of a girl being charmed by sweets.

Arthur's Perspective

While I was living as a boy in the dormitory, my body was still that of a girl. Inevitably, there were times when I had to avoid being seen by Ash. I had anticipated that to be a headache, inducing many problems, but it turned out easier than expected.

In the mornings and evenings, Ash left the room to practice martial arts all alone. As a result, I was able to change my clothes in peace. Whenever that wasn't the case or I needed more time than usual, I just went to my private room at the mansion.

Today was such an occasion. After taking a bath, I returned to my dorm room, where I found Ash tinkering with wooden planks on top of his desk. I only greeted him briefly and didn't start a conversation because it seemed like he was concentrating. However, I was still curious about what he was doing, so I peered in from behind. Ash had a tendency to start the most unexpected projects, so I just couldn't help but wonder. On this occasion, it looked like he was shaving off the wooden planks, assembling them together and making boxes.

"It is a mouse trap!" he said.

"Sorry for interrupting!"

I was a bit startled when he noticed me. I was watching him as stealthily as possible, but he caught me off guard. It felt a little awkward when he smiled gently and gave me a look as if he had seen through me.

“Did you handcraft it?” I asked.

“Yes! I am using wood waste that Quid brought me from a craftsman he knows.”

He handed it over to me. I didn’t see any nails. It looked like he had just carved out some gaps and attached it together like a puzzle.

“You’ve got nimble fingers!” I remarked.

“I made them in bulk to deal with the rats back at the village.”

There were mouse traps back at the capital too, but this was the first time I was able to properly look at one. Generally, my attendants just stealthily placed them around the corners of the room and replaced them when necessary. That was the extent of my knowledge.

“How do you trap them with this?”

“For this one, I will add a trap door here, which will shut down once the rat takes the bait inside.” He quickly went back to finish the trap. “It is easier to understand if you see it with your own eyes.”

There was a small hole at the top through which Ash pulled a string with bait attached to it. He linked the string to a hook holding up the trap door. Pulling on the string removed the hook, automatically letting the trap door close the only exit.

“That’s amazing! You only have to pull the string?”

It was simple but well thought out. I borrowed the trap from Ash and activated the mechanism several times. It was fun to see the door closing on its own.

“Do you like it? If I had used a basket, it may have been more interesting, as you could have seen inside.”

“Oops, sorry. I know it’s not a toy.”

I had never touched a rat trap before, so I became a little absorbed. I cleared my throat to hide my embarrassment and gave it back to Ash. My cheeks felt hot—I realized I was probably blushing. I didn’t know why, but somehow my body always felt hot when talking to Ash.

“This is an intriguing mechanism, right? It is easy to understand when looking at it, but I would have never come up with something like this on my own,” Ash proclaimed while playing with the trap just as I did a few seconds ago.

“Are you just being considerate?”

“About what?” Ash looked puzzled.

“Am I wrong? I thought that since I was enjoying myself playing with something as trivial as a mouse trap...”

“There is nothing wrong about that.” He tilted his head in sync with the sound of the closing trap door. “You thought it was amazing, right? I think so too.” Ash expressed his agreement. “Since it is so simple, anyone can make one. The materials needed are also readily available, and it is efficient. It might have turned into a mundane article, but that is just another testament to its amazingness.”

“...You’re right.” I felt embarrassed that I hadn’t thought about it like that at all.

“It is important to let yourself be impressed—it feels good. And it is equally important to express that feeling of amazement—it makes other people feel good too.” Ash smiled while handing me the rat trap. “I was happy I got to see your reaction, so you can have this one. I will make another one for myself.”

“T-Thanks...”

“No, thank you for praising my handmade article!”

He went back to scraping wood planks while humming. I watched from behind while the wood changed its shape to the tune of a song I didn’t know. The plank’s surface became uneven as the knife moved in a well-practiced rhythm.

“By the way, why are you making rat traps?”

“I need a new guinea pig.”

Sorry, but how were rats and guinea pigs related?

When I came back to the room today, Ash was once again doing something at

the desk. I quietly approached to see him quickly move a quill over a bunch of paper. In an effort not to interrupt him, I held my breath while following the letters he wrote with my eyes.

It looked like he was summarizing the research he'd performed in the temple. He was writing down the process for using powdered bones and the dung of chickens, cows, and pigs as compost, complementing each entry with the title of the book he had used as a reference. The text continued, stating that it was necessary to research the reasons why these methods were not currently being used. *I see, so that's the next step for our research. I'll prepare for it.* Since it concerned me too as one of his assistants, I nodded along while reading the text.

He added another section called "future research subjects." It listed water wheels and windmills, book binding, agricultural machinery and equipment... Wait, weren't all those a bit too much? And he still continued writing! Next, it said, "verifying metallurgy" and "reviewing construction techniques." And there was still more?! *Isn't that a bit too much? How are you going to accomplish all that with just one body?*

The notes continued mentioning medical technology and the maintenance of traffic routes. How did one person come up with all these things at once? I started to feel nervous as I watched the letters keep increasing, covering my mouth with one hand.

While I was focused on the letters on the page, I suddenly felt a gaze. Looking up, I saw Ash gently smiling and observing me with great interest. It was as if he was observing the movements of a bird that he had never seen before.

"Were you teasing me?!" It seemed that he had noticed me and added more writing just to see my reaction.

"Not at all. I do not know what you are talking about."

"You were pretending!" *What a bully!* I sharpened my voice and drew in closer. Since I had been observing him over the shoulder all along, I now suddenly found myself extremely close to his face.

"What was I pretending?" Right next to me, he smiled while playing innocent. We were close enough for both our bangs to touch.

“S-Sorry! I didn’t mean to get so close.”

“I do not mind. We are friends after all.”

Really? Until recently I wouldn’t have dreamt of getting this close to a person of the opposite sex. My heart was racing. Was this normal for friends? The image of his face up close was now burned into my memory! When smiling, Ash looked quite... nice.

While I was reminiscing about our interaction, Ash murmured in a low voice. “I did not mean to tease you, but I did write out some things which are currently irrelevant.”

“So I was right!!” *You did tease me after all!*

As I drew closer again, Ash showed a gentle, wry smile. “Besides, it seemed that you got more interested and leaned in the more I wrote.”

“I was just a little worried that you’re going to be too busy... with this many things ahead.” *I wasn’t that interested...* But I did not say that last part out loud. If I had, I would have just told another lie and might have ended up freezing.

He was probably right. I wondered what would happen if we achieved all those goals. I was worried, but at the same time I was also excited. I really wondered what would happen. The more I thought about it, the higher my expectations were. There was so much left to do. So many things that we could do. So many things that I hadn’t been able to do before.

“I mean...” I spoke in a slightly bitter tone. “I’ve never done anything like this... It’s a lot of fun...”

“I am glad to hear that.” He accepted my bitterness with a bright, warm smile. “We are going to have a lot more fun. And even if I die, it is not going to end!”

“What?”

“Enjoy yourself to the fullest!” Ash proclaimed with a beaming face. He seemed genuinely happy.

For some reason, I no longer felt like I was trapped and couldn’t run away.

I had always been a tiny existence. None of the adults expected anything from

me. They probably didn't even want me to talk, and most likely wished I didn't have any limbs. Whenever I opened my mouth, I was faced with a sigh. Whenever I tried doing something new, I was stopped. I knew the reason—there were people out there trying to use me. If I did something, I eventually would have just ended up being used, causing trouble to everybody. That's why I started curling myself up. I felt constrained. I was in pain. But even so, I somehow managed to hold out. All I had to do was shut my mouth, wrap my arms around my knees, and be on standby in my room. It was easy.

I didn't even speak with the maids or servants. If I spotted a bird outside the window, I didn't try to chase it with my eyes. I didn't lend an ear when someone was talking about their troubles. I didn't engage with any of the playmates that were introduced to me. I persevered. I was able to control myself. Gradually, it became easier. At the same time, my mind and body grew colder and stiffened to a point where they became frozen solid.

I imagined myself sitting in the corner of my room, holding my knees. There was a cold breeze, but I persevered. It grew colder and I still endured. I was freezing, but I didn't flinch. I was in pain and I was scared, but I still endured. I just persevered, persevered, persevered...

Ah, I can't take it anymore! If only I turned into ice, I would no longer have to endure all this...

"Are you okay?"

Suddenly, I felt some warmth. It drove away the cold from my hands, my forehead, and my neck.

"Luckily, it does not look like a cold."

I felt relieved. What a gentle warmth. My blood, which had frozen solid throughout my body, slowly started flowing again.

"Did you have a nightmare? If only we had some essential oils for aromatherapy... But the scent of herb tea should also work a little."

I felt the warmth going away. At that moment, I reached out towards it—I didn't want to lose it. *Please stay.* My voice leaked out and I woke up from my dream. My hand, which had pushed through the darkness of the night, was

grasping his red hair.

“Good morning... Although it might be a little too soon for that.”

“Ash?”

I saw Ash’s warm smile awkwardly staring at me with my still-blurred vision.

“Yes, it is me. Sorry for waking you up. I was worried because you were tossing around.”

“I was tossing around?”

“It looked like you were having a nightmare.”

“Ah, yes...” So, I had been dreaming that I was freezing. It was one of my recurring nightmares. “Thanks, but I’m fine now.”

“Are you sure?” Ash put on a smile and added, “How about we drink hot tea?”

He just ignored my words.

“What? I said I was fine...”

“Yes, but we should still drink some hot tea anyway. I brought some pleasantly-flavored herbs from the village. Please wait a moment.”

Ash gently removed my hand and withdrew his face. I slept on the top of the bunk bed, so he climbed down the ladder. When I hastily looked out of the bed, I saw him taking something out of his dresser.

“Let us see... Citrus flavor is supposed to have a calming effect... If I remember correctly, this perilla might help... I might as well put in some honey too.”

“Ash, I told you I’m fine. You don’t have to go out of your way for me.”

He just politely replied to my attempt to stop him. “Well, then we should celebrate you being fine with tea. I am going to boil the water now.”

Once again, he had ignored me in the politest way possible before leaving the room. While I knew that it was too far away, I reached out towards his back. I was shocked. He didn’t let me persevere.

Involuntarily, a smile formed in my lips. That smile felt a little warm too.

After a short while, Ash came back with a mug in his hand. I was restless, so I had already climbed down out of bed. I was fidgeting around when he handed me the steaming hot mug.

“Sorry for the wait. Here you go.”

“T-Thanks.”

The steam was accompanied by a pleasing smell tickling my nose. The sweet scent of honey complimented the sour, fruity taste of the tea. And above anything else, the warmth of the mug gave me a feeling of reassurance.

“You could have waited in your bed. It is quite cold tonight.”

“I couldn’t stand still thinking that I made you go outside in that cold weather.”

“Do not worry, I have not once been ill since I was born.”

It may have sounded like he was boasting, but I could believe this was true. Ash appeared to be an extremely sturdy child.

“You can sit down if you want,” he said.

Ash sat down on the bottom bed leaving a space for me. How shameless of me to just sit down next to a boy like that! But, on the other hand, I was pretending to be a boy myself too. Moreover, there was no one around who would be nagging afterwards, and Ash was my friend. So, it was alright? Yeah, it probably was.

I timidly sat down next to him. I felt like I was doing something bad. My heart was racing, and my face was hot. I took a sip out of the mug, so that Ash wouldn’t notice my strange behavior. The warm tea passed down my throat together with an invigorating flavor. Then, the sweetness of the honey slowly filled up my mouth.

“This tastes nice...”

“The honey comes from Tanya, who recently started beekeeping, and the herb I picked up during a hunt when Ban, the village’s hunter, told me what it

was. It tastes like citrus, right? But it is actually perilla.”

“Perilla?”

“It is said to have the power to drive off bad things, and it is used to treat wounds. If you drink it like this, it soothes your throat. The hunter uses it to neutralize the smell of meat.”

While talking, Ash put a blanket over my shoulders. It still felt warm from when Ash had slept covered with it. Together with the tea in my hands, it warmed both my body and soul.

“Honey contains a lot of nutrients and is easily absorbed, so it is perfect to drink before going to bed. If you mix it with warm milk, you will have an even sounder sleep, but... Unfortunately, there was not any milk left.”

“It helps you sleep?”

“Yes, that is what I have read. According to that book, consuming honey produces something inside your body which has a soothing effect.”

Ash kept talking idly about the beekeeping back at his village. I couldn’t help but be intrigued by the beekeeper and the hunter, who came off like a married couple even though they hadn’t made any progress in terms of dating. I wanted to know how their relationship was going to develop.

Slowly but surely, my feelings frozen by the nightmare came back to life.

“Thanks, Ash. I feel much warmer now.”

“Do you think you will be able to sleep?”

“Yeah, absolutely.”

Any nightmare would have melted if faced with the amount of warmth I had just received.

The next day, I slept in late.



Chapter 3: The Paper Plan

The efficiency of our research at the temple increased even further when Lady Reina joined us. As I had anticipated, strength lay in numbers. As a result, we were able to write up an initial plan for conducting experiments on potential fertilizers.

The first on the list was fertilizer made from powdered bones. Chef Yacoo introduced us to a livestock farmer—or rather a butcher—willing to give us their bone waste. If you boiled, dried, and subsequently pulverized those bones, you ended up with powdered bone fertilizer. All things considered, this was probably the easiest method to produce it.

Next, there was fertilizer made from chicken feces. According to my research, they had the most balanced composition among all the excreta commonly used as manure. However, the book I had consulted also warned that they had a much stronger smell than the feces of cows or pigs. Those latter two, as well as horse manure, were considered to be much easier to handle. Of course, they did not smell nice either, but they stank less than chicken feces. At the same time, they also clearly contained less nutrients.

Finally, we had also drawn up a proposal for human waste, but decided to put that on hold for now due to concerns regarding public health. There was a risk of creating parasites and spreading infectious diseases such as cholera or typhoid fever if we failed to properly compost the excreta. In fact, I read documents at the temple detailing the large-scale outbreak of an infectious disease as the result of using human waste as fertilizer after the advanced technology of the ancient civilization had been lost. Looking up books on composting, I found postscript annotations describing the downfall of entire cities due to this. Even in the remote farm village where I was born and raised, fertilizer made from human waste was considered a taboo, so I imagined it must have posed a considerable threat back in the day.

However, the notion that “using human excreta to create fertilizer is

dangerous” had mistakenly turned into “using all animal excreta for fertilizer is dangerous.” That conception was wrong. As long as you processed it adequately, animal excreta, including human waste, was perfectly safe to use as fertilizer. I wanted to give it a go. In fact, the books at the temple did not say that “the use of animal excreta to produce fertilizer led to the downfall of cities,” but that “the inadequate use of human excreta as fertilizer led to disease, bringing about the downfall of cities.” Even back then someone had known the correct cause.

I needed to write this up as a report before submitting it together with our fertilizer experiment plan to the appropriate person.

“It looks like I will have to read up on parasites and infectious diseases.” The dignitaries of this world would not have been very convinced if I simply cited my past-life memories as references, after all.

I turned my head to look at the temple’s library. I wondered if there were any useful sources there.

“Mother Yae, which shelf has books on medical issues?” I asked.

“What?”

Mother Yae, who was resting her cheek on her hand with a tired look, was caught off guard by my question. My other dear collaborators, Lady Maika, Lady Reina, and Lord Arthur, who had fallen prostrate on the ground or looked up at the ceiling completely exhausted, gave me a weary look. It was as if they wanted to say, “You want to research even more?”

“I want to research diseases related to the use of manure. Currently, animal manure is thought of as dangerous, so I need to prove its safety first if we want our plan to be approved.” I had to investigate this as much as possible. As I expressed my firm resolve, all the others dropped their shoulders. *Wait. Don’t get discouraged. Let’s work on this together, yes?*

“Please help me. I just want this plan to be as thorough as possible so that it can be approved. Everyone’s efforts will be rewarded in the end.” If we stopped now, all those efforts would have gone to waste. *You don’t want that to happen, right?*

When I rephrased my intentions, all four of them confirmed each other's distressed expressions and reluctantly started to get moving. *Including Mother Yae, you're all still young, so don't hesitate to show a bit more enthusiasm!*

In my past life, all serious university students generally needed to write reports like this every three months at least. Considering we were a five-person team, we should have easily finished one per month. I wanted to "shoot the general" with a missile crafted out of our special report as soon as possible.

While I was scanning the books related to medicine, Mother Yae gave me a serious look. "I think I'll just stop considering you my junior." It seemed that she had removed me from the usual social categories.

This was followed by Lord Arthur and Lady Reina endorsing her statement.

"I think I'll join you in that."

"Yes, I'm sure that would be more appropriate."

I was fine not being treated like a child, but how did they categorize me now?

Lady Maika zealously nodded along. Was it possible that she had already put me into a special category? It seemed likely. I was reminded of her treating me like a specialty export.

The time had finally come to meet with the dormitory supervisor. My first interaction with Lady Reina's mother clearly demonstrated her quick wit.

Like most parents in this world, she was still quite young, looking like she was in her late twenties. Her facial features made it clear that she was blood-related to Lady Reina. The restrained expression on her face with those narrow, long eyes gave off the impression of a very capable worker. Some people might have felt intimidated by her look.

"It seems you have been getting along well with my daughter." Mrs. Rihn spoke in a monotonous and formal voice.

Those words were a thinly veiled threat. She was worried that I had been enticing Lady Reina. And she was right. Of course, I did not say that out loud. I feared that, depending on her character, this could have produced an

overreaction.

“Yes. Since she is the roommate of my fellow villager Maika, I have been in frequent contact with her.”

“Lady Yuika’s daughter, right? Are you close with her too?”

“Yes, she is a good friend. We live in a small village and there are not many people of the same age. Besides, we both studied together at the church.”

I responded with a smile, but she did not let her guard down yet. As a maid in the city involved in government affairs, she must have been used to arguing as fiercely as clashing swords with sly old foxes. It seemed like she felt a suspicious aura surrounding this 11-year-old—yours truly.

“So, you are saying that it is merely a coincidence that you are friends with Reina and Maika?”

“I believe that good fortune has given me the privilege to be here.”

There was no doubt that I would not have been able to study in the city if I was not the same age as Lady Maika. If I had been a couple of years off, I could not have joined her. Of course, I realized that Mrs. Rihn wanted to know something else, though.

She picked up with her slender fingers the second batch of crepes on the table and said, “Are you telling me there are no ulterior motives behind giving me this dessert?” She cut straight to the point.

It was probably fine to give a noncommittal answer, but being too vague might have left a bad impression. At the same time, I also did not want to lie. Depending on how broad-minded and tolerant Mrs. Rihn was, it may have been better to just straight up confess my true intentions. I needed to test the waters first.

“I realize that it is not polite to answer with another question, but... What would you consider to be an ulterior motive?”

“Well, what comes to your mind?”

She replied with yet another question. I did not want to carelessly commit to an answer just yet. I felt a bit nervous.

“For example, I could imagine someone coming to an unfamiliar place without any friends might want to get closer to local people who can show them around. I think anyone is prone to having these kinds of ulterior motives.”

As I tilted my head awaiting her response, she nodded with a stiff facial expression. It seemed like she was at least willing to forgive a little human weakness.

Seeing that opening, I decided to go on the offense. “A lot of effort and valuable ingredients went into making this dessert. Unfortunately, I cannot say that I presented you with this gift out of pure generosity, without expecting anything in return. At the very least, I want to establish a cordial relationship.”

“Well, alright. At least I can trust you more than if you had said there were no ulterior motives at all.” She gave me a dispassionate look, as if to ask if there was anything more to it. Her beauty made it all the more powerful, leaving me shivering.

I decided to confess everything, as it seemed that Mrs. Rihn disliked half-hearted explanations. “If I just wanted to connect with Reina, I probably would not have needed to make such a fancy dessert.”

“What is your objective then?”

I showed her the plan that I had drafted.

“I want to implement this.”

“‘Plan for Improving Agriculture’? ‘First Proposal’?” Her expression wavered. It was cute seeing the bewilderment of this distinguished, beautiful woman. The contrast was as explosive as the force created by exerting and releasing power.

“I apologize for approaching your precious daughter by enticing her with gifts. But I want you to understand that I did not mean to deceive her, neither do I bear any ill will towards you. I also do not bear any grudge against the city.” Contrary to my inner feelings, I spoke with a serious look and in a sincere tone. However, what I said reflected my true intentions, so it was not like I was putting on a show. Humans were curious creatures with curious thoughts.

“I am merely focused on advancing this plan,” I continued. “Reina also helped writing it up. Since the pursuit of knowledge is one of the army academy’s main

objectives, we would appreciate it if you could give us feedback on the result of our research.”

Mrs. Rihn carefully took the plan into her hands as if it was an unknown object and started reading it. The introduction contained an outline and listed our goals, so it was easy to get a quick overview of our plan.

“You can take your time and read it in detail later. Some of the contents may not go well with the dessert in front of your eyes.”

Even the best crepes would have lost all their flavor if you ate them while reading about things coming out of the posterior.

Mrs. Rihn looked at me in disbelief, as if she had not understood my words of concern.

“I just want you to enjoy the dessert as much as possible,” I clarified.

“I see... I guess I should take up your kind offer...” She put the plan on the table and looked at the ceiling while holding down her eyebrows. “What am I going to do...? How is someone like this a student at the academy?”

How about you eat something sweet for now? If you find the motivation to read it, you'll find that it explains your role in the plan too.

Lady Maika and Lady Reina had anticipated that Mrs. Rihn was going to be greatly perplexed, so they had advised me to write the plan out in detail. In my past life, it would have been considered an unrefined university essay, but here in this world it was a top-grade paper.

“How did I end up here...?” Mrs. Rihn muttered.

Most likely because you are a rational person.

I would not have stood any chance if she had become emotional and simply told me to quit bribing and back off her daughter. The moment she had chosen to talk things out with me, it was her loss. It was all part of the plan. For someone as serious as Mrs. Rihn, there was no other choice than seriously assessing anything that was presented to her as “the result of research at the academy.” Being too serious had a lot of demerits. At the same time, that was also a reason why I was able to feel goodwill towards her.

At her wit's end, Mrs. Rihn reached out for a crepe. "Oh my! This is delicious! Extremely delicious!"

Like mother, like daughter. Mrs. Rihn spoke in a mature and graceful manner, but her reactions were similar to her daughter's. *Let's just all be happy together!*

Our daily lives continued as usual while Mrs. Rihn was seriously deliberating our plan. Like every morning, I walked to the dormitory's garden for my martial arts training. Lord Arthur and Lady Reina had expressed surprise at my daily routine, probably because they now considered me to be a sort of civil servant after working on the plan together. I tended to agree with that view, but did Lord Arthur not benefit from me leaving our room in the morning and evening? After all, they had to change their clothes. And, as the gentleman that I was, I did not want to pry.

While I was warming up, Lady Maika appeared in casual training clothes. "Morning, Ash!"

"Good morning, Maika! Today is another beautiful day."

"Yes, indeed!" Even though it was still morning, Lady Maika was already in good spirits and had a bright smile on her face.

Unlike me, who practiced mostly as a pretext, she did it completely out of her will to improve her skills. She had been learning the basics of sword fighting from her father, Mr. Klein, but it seemed that she had started to get serious after the bear incident. She had proclaimed that she wanted to fight alongside me if another incident like that were to happen.

While I was moved by her determination, I preferred if I did not ever end up in another dangerous situation like that again. When I encountered the bear, I would have liked to run away if possible, or at the very least I would have liked to shoot it with an arrow from a safe distance.

In any case, Lady Maika had been practicing every morning and evening since that incident. She was top-class at the academy, where we were only learning the basics now. Even when participating in mixed fights, she was among the best, possibly because girls developed faster at our age.

Either way, I did not stand a chance against her. Compared to all the other students, I was probably somewhere in the lower-middle ranks. When Lord Arthur had questioned me, saying, “How did you manage to fight a bear like that?”, all I had been able to answer was, “I never said it was a fair fight.” There was no way I could have beat the bear in a fair fight to the death. I was a fiendish coward ready to use poison at any opportunity. I was an apprentice of the way of chemistry. For the first time in a while, I was thinking about compounding poison while going for a run.

After my run, I faced Lady Maika for a light practice match. I readied my wooden spear and she drew her wooden sword before starting our rhythmic dance. Martial arts in this world were based on mathematical perceptions, and thus were considerably refined. Similar to how certain standards of agriculture had been preserved, it seemed that the same applied to fighting techniques. After all, history had taught us that fighting was just as commonplace in our daily lives as eating.

In the practice match, you were supposed to move rhythmically to a three-count starting with the attacker’s first strike. The defender matched the movement, deflecting the strike and breaking the attacker’s stance before going on the counteroffensive. Then sides were switched, and the three-count started again. Once you got used to it, attack and defense connected flawlessly into a dance.

Since Lady Maika and I had practiced by ourselves for a while, our movements had become completely synchronized, and at least for the base pattern, we were able to keep it up until we both ran out of stamina. The sound of my wooden spear clashing against her wooden sword was music to my ears.

Lady Maika had a smile on her face and was covered in sweat. I must have looked the same. There was a sense of security that she was going to stop any blow. At the same time, there was a sense of unity, as if our minds had become one. It felt strangely exalting as we moved with our wills united but our bodies apart. Or, in other words, it was fun. People who genuinely liked to dance must have been motivated by this same sensation.

However, no matter how much I enjoyed myself, my body had its limits. When I started running out of breath, my movements grew dull. Our gaze met

and we both knew it was time to finish for today. Following that realization, Lady Maika sidestepped my spear before thrusting her wooden sword at the nape of my neck. The match was over.

“Thank you.”

“Thank you!”

As village chief Klein had taught us, we exchanged our thanks at the end.

Suddenly, we heard someone clapping. “That was a beautiful training match. Even though it was just the basic pattern, it’s rare to see two people work so well together.”

Praised by Sir George, who was one of the instructors for combat skills, Lady Maika was bursting with joy. “Thank you very much! Hehe, Ash and I have good chemistry.”

“We have known each other for a while, so it is easy to synchronize our movements.”

“Right!” She seemed even happier after I affirmed the statement.

Sir George relaxed his virile expression and showed a little smile. “I can tell you have learned from Sir Klein. It looks like he is still as strong as ever.”

“Do you know my father?” Lady Maika seemed slightly perplexed at the high praise for her father.

“Yes, your father is quite famous around here. When I was a young boy, I admired him.”

“What was he doing back then?”

“Don’t you know? I’d love to tell you, but if I start talking about your father, I’m going to be here for a long time,” Sir George replied with a wry smile. It looked like he had come with some business. It was not usual for a teacher to visit the dormitory before breakfast.

“Sir George, do you have any urgent business?” I asked.

“Yes, I have been tasked with some work by the military, so unfortunately I won’t be able to teach class today. I’m sorry, but you’ll have to do some self-

study today. Could you please tell everyone else?"

"Yes, we will let everyone know. No problem."

"Thank you."

That was an easy task, but he really seemed extremely busy, just like Lord Itsuki. It appeared that anyone in a managerial position taking their work seriously had a tight schedule. Since Sir George was Lord Itsuki's chief vassal, I would have loved to get closer to him, but unfortunately there was no opening. This was bad. At this rate, I was never going to shoot the general.

That thought prompted me to make a proposal to my distant uncle who was in a hurry. "Sir George, would it be possible to help with your work today as part of my self-study time?"

"Hm, I'm not sure..."

He had a sour look on his face. He was probably thinking that it would only make his work harder if he was joined by someone inexperienced whom he had to teach. I could not deny that logic. However, judging from his lessons so far, I guessed that he was busy with the maintenance of equipment and logistics. I was convinced that I would be able to file documents or verify equipment after a short briefing. Besides, I had some experience from back in the village. My mathematical knowledge was considered far above average in this world.

"I can help carry any luggage, and I can calculate too. If you feel like I will just be in the way, I do not mind reading a book at the temple, but I would love to help you. And it does not have to be just this one time, I am willing to help you whenever I am available."

Sir George brightened up after I offered my continued help and emphasized my ability to read and write as well as do math. "Ah, yes, you already know how to read and write. And you can calculate too. Mother Yae praised you as the most talented student she's ever had."

"That is flattering me too much. Do you think it is worth trying it out?"

Sir George paused briefly before almost immediately nodding in agreement. It seemed that my earlier appeal had convinced him. "Alright. I haven't really had much time to talk to you either. Do you want to come along?"

“Thank you, I would love to. I look forward to expanding my knowledge.”

I asked Lady Maika to relay Sir George’s message and promptly walked off. As we parted, Lady Maika warned me, “Don’t overdo yourself!”. But I did not see how I could have possibly gone on a rampage just by managing equipment and filing documents.

Maika’s Perspective

Since today’s lessons had been canceled, we decided to use the time to practice our fighting skills. I can enjoy classroom lectures as long as I’m with Ash, but when it comes to physical activities, I can have fun even without him. Of course, it’s even better when he’s there.

I was swinging my wooden sword while humming a tune. *Yes, this feels good.* I did not feel any resistance from the wind surrounding my sword as I swiftly cut through the air. Reina stopped the blow with her short wooden sword. Her expression was tense, or rather stiff.

“You can loosen up a bit more. I’m not going to hit you.”

“I know, but...”

This time around she was swinging her wooden spear towards me. I barely felt the blow as I blocked it with my wooden sword.

“You can hit much harder. I won’t get hurt.”

Reina let out a sigh as she dropped her shoulders. “When I’m on the defensive, I get so scared that I freeze, and when I’m attacking, I feel uncomfortable to use too much force.”

“I see.” *That makes you an easy target, Reina. A very easy target.* “Maybe you should focus on self-defense. And if something happens, you should try and run away rather than fight. Alternatively, you can go through my intense training until you’ve got no weak spots left.”

Arthur, who was watching on the side, reacted to my words. “I’m guessing your intense training would be very tough indeed.”

“Well, it’s based on the special training I received from the person whom my

mom always refers to as ‘the best swordsman in the country’. So, you know, it might take a while to get used to it. Or, to put it differently, Ash tried running away when he first started the training.”

After hearing my explanation, Reina shook her head with a pale expression. “I’m planning to become a maid, so I don’t have to be *that* good at fighting.”

“If it’s hard enough to make Ash want to run away, I’m not sure I want to try it either...” Arthur added.

Ash somehow made it through in the end, though.

“Considering your path forward, Reina, Ash might be a better practice partner. You should try training with him next time,” Arthur suggested.

“Why is that?” Reina looked towards Arthur, who was Ash’s current partner for the basic practice.

“Hm, let’s see. He’s very skilled at defense, so it would be a good model for someone focusing on self-defense.”

He was right. It took a lot of effort to gain even a single strike over Ash. My dad had praised his defense too.

“But at the same time, Ash’s attack is a lot weaker. I wonder why,” Arthur pondered.

“I think he’s holding back so that his opponent doesn’t get hurt,” I said.

My dad had also noticed that Ash’s movements were blunter when it came to attacking. I don’t think Ash realized it himself, but as someone who had been his practice partner for a while now, I realized that he was holding back. The fact that I had not even been hurt once so far was proof of that. I, on the other hand, had given him several bruises already.

“Ash is too gentle to hurt anyone,” I remarked.

It was the same reason why Reina’s attack was so soft. Apparently, there was a surprising amount of people who did not like showing animosity towards others.

“Will he be alright if he’s ever in a real fight?” Arthur asked worriedly. “Oh, does he want to become a military officer?”

In response to Arthur's concerns, Reina tilted her head, probably assuming Ash wanted to become a civil official. "If he does indeed intend to become a military officer, then I would worry too..."

"I haven't heard anything in that direction from him..." Arthur started to look worried.

Reina shrugged her shoulders. "I wonder... Do you know, Maika?"

"Not that I know."

They both seemed convinced. Ash was the son of a farmer after all. In his situation, there were usually not many options other than taking over the field from his parents. Normally, someone like him would have never dreamt of a career after attending the army academy. He would not have been able to enter in the first place. And he would not have had any ideas regarding his career path this soon after getting in. Normally, that is. But Ash wasn't normal. Either way, he was going to achieve what he wanted.

"I'm not really sure what he even wants to do..." I began.

If I had to take a guess, I would have said something similar to a civil official. But then again, Ash was also the kind of wonderful person who got all fired up in the kitchen. So, it wouldn't have surprised me if he ended up rampaging as a military officer. *I mean, he went with Sir George today...* I tried to warn him, but even my mom had said that Ash was someone who immediately broke free from any shackles. I wondered if he had already forgotten my warning. I needed to go see him as soon as he came back.

As I was lost in thought, Arthur and Reina were waiting for me to continue. "...But I'm sure Ash will be fine even if he decides to become a military officer!"

After all, he had even concocted a lot of poison, saying with a smile that he was easily able to kill anything up to a bear.

"Weren't you talking about Ash being too gentle, Reina?" Arthur asked.

"Yes, that's what I said."

"I'm not sure someone gentle would concoct a poison..."

"...Me neither..."

What were they talking about? Ash was gentle. He just used the poison to protect us from the enemy.

“Besides...” I started.

I swung my sword where I stood. One, two, three. I imagined it slashing through the neck of an enemy storming towards me. Be it a wolf, a bear, or a human. I was ready to cut down anyone whom I considered to be a danger.

“I’m going to cut down his enemies!” I proclaimed.

His red blood. His pale skin. His closed eyelids. And his face which no longer smiled. I never wanted to see Ash like that again. I had to become stronger.

“Can you be my next partner, Arthur?” I immediately asked.

As I had mentioned earlier, Ash was too nice and played it safe, so training with him felt somewhat lacking. Of course, I had a lot of fun sparring with him, and I was happy just being with him. But if I wanted to polish my skills, I had to put myself into slightly riskier situations.

“Give me all you’ve got!”

When I challenged Arthur with a smile, his face stiffened. “Go easy on me.”

Did you not hear me say, “Give me all you’ve got”?

“I don’t think I can fight you with my level of skill... Maybe you should ask Glenn.”

“Ah, Glenn. Yeah, I’m sure that would be a great matchup.”

Glenn was probably the best among the boys at the academy this term. He was tall and very strong, and he had a good stance. However, while he was number one among the boys, he unfortunately only came second once you took into consideration the girls as well.

“But since Glenn’s not here today, it’s your turn now, Arthur.”

“I’m not feeling too well today, Maika... Maika? Wait! I’ve not readied my sword yet!”

“Ah, right.”

My dad didn’t ready his sword either when he got serious. Ash called it the

“neutral position,” and he said it was some kind of secret technique. Due to my inexperience, I was always told to adopt the middle position. Since Arthur had not moved even after pointing my sword at him, I assumed he also had some secret technique. *I can't wait to land a hit on him.*

“Okay, okay! I'll fight you!”

Good! With a grin, I swung my sword at Arthur, who had finally accepted.

“You're fast, Maika!”

“Hehe, thanks.”

“But it would be great if you could slow down a little.”

Don't worry! I'll make sure to stop before it hurts.



Sir George's work was to manage the supplies of regional troops or, in other words, all the troops in the city. He took care of everything. No matter how you looked at it, that was too harsh. Today he was supposed to review all the non-perishable items. He did have five subordinate soldiers helping him, but five were far too few. Non-perishable equipment included iron swords, iron spears, large and small shields, bows and crossbows with their corresponding projectiles, spare parts for the large-scale crossbows installed on the city walls, horse gear and carriage equipment, ropes, ladders, camping gear, and much more.

The city's military was divided into a standing army made up of volunteers and reserve troops relying on conscription. Since there were not many volunteer soldiers and they all managed their own equipment on a day-to-day basis, that part was no problem. However, there were many eligible reserve troops in the case of an emergency, and they did not handle their equipment outside the regular training sessions. Moreover, in the case of a real emergency, all the residents might have been called to arms. Consequently, there was an abundance of equipment prepared for the reserve troops. There was also a stock of perishable items—mainly food—reserved as supplies for a siege or soldiers patrolling the area surrounding the city.

It was unbelievable that Sir George alone was in charge of all that. Anyone

would have been busy in that position. There should have been at the very least five more middle managers with another five subordinates each doing the actual work. Besides, he did not just have to review the numbers of equipment available, he also had to inspect it for damage and, depending on the severity, either send it off for repair or replace it with a new item. Every new year, he did all that work at once. *Are you out of your mind?*

“Sir George, how about we re-examine the process of managing the equipment?”

Before starting with the inventory, I motivated myself to make a proposal as I was inspecting a spear for damages. No one should have had to do such a workload at once. Even less with just a single person in charge. The system was prone to dishonesty. That is why the administrator, in this case Lord Itsuki, only put in charge his most trusted man. All it took was some temptation for the system to crumble.

“Do you happen to have an ingenious idea on how we can reduce our workload?” Even the overly serious Sir George could not hide his cynicism. He had been doing this day after day. Meanwhile, this was my first day here.

“I think we can figure out ways to split up the load. For example, if you are only doing the inventory once a year, it will pile up too much. It would be better if you did it four times a year, at the change of each season.”

That way the workload could be split into four, possibly divided along the line of the different types of equipment.

“That does seem easier than doing it all at once, but I’m not sure I’ll be available that often given my line of work.”

“How about we get someone else to help? There could be one commanding officer as supervisor with five subordinates. Or maybe even more. But for now, I think it would be enough to have four teams with six people each.”

“Increasing manpower does indeed mean there will be less work for each individual, but...” The glum look on his face expressed his worries for an increase in possible misappropriations.

Currently, Sir George would have been held responsible in the case of any

problems. However, a mutual surveillance system may have been able to deter any embezzlers. Another solution could have been a rotation of the team members on their respective tasks. It may have also been beneficial to create a register where you documented every piece of equipment taken out of the warehouse. That way, it would be possible to compare the contents of the warehouse with the register and discover any irregularities more easily. Depending on the circumstances, it could even allow you to determine the timeframe when the equipment went missing.

“In regard to safety measures, the workload might increase a little at first, but overall, it can be split up more evenly. Also, an equipment register might help reduce mistakes and the impact of any damages suffered.”

“I see. It doesn’t sound bad at all...”

Sir George had stopped working and was listening attentively to my proposal. It seemed that this work was quite tough for him. I did not blame him. He may have been overly serious, but he was still human. And any human would have recognized the problem at hand.

“Above all, I think this is just too much work for one person. Both in terms of effort required as well as responsibilities. You may be able to do it by yourself, but as the current situation indicates, you may be the only one.”

In other words, what would happen if Sir George could no longer do the job? Sir George was an exception doing this all by himself without causing any problems. Any system that relied on a single person to function had to be revised. Any organization that wanted to survive had to make a rigorous distinction between trusting an individual’s ability and depending upon them.

“Besides, I imagine there are many other tasks which only you can do. You should leave the work that anyone can do to other people. That way everyone will be happy.”

I did not say that I wanted Sir George to simply have it easier. He seemed to be the type of person who would have opposed that line of arguing. Therefore, I let him know that there were probably more important tasks waiting for him, appealing to his sense of duty. Surely Lord Itsuki had a lot of other work that he wanted to entrust to someone as reliable as Sir George. After all, he was so

busy that he could not even make any time to meet his beloved niece.

It looked like my persuasion had been successful, as his previously dull eyes were now glowing with excitement. “You’re right. There are other tasks that only I can do.”

I’m glad you liked my way of looking at things.

“Thank you for your valuable opinion. Let’s try doing things the way you suggest.”

As I could not wait to implement my changes, I replied to the motivated Sir George with a broad grin.

“However, I’m not sure I understood everything you said. Can I ask you for advice in the future too?”

“Of course, I will gladly help.”

“Thanks a lot. Sorry for taking you away from your studies at the academy.”

Please, don’t worry about it. Since this was a strategic arrangement for bringing the general into shooting range, I did not need any thanks.

“I will write up a proposal on how to improve the process of equipment management, which we can then use as a base for further discussion.”

“Thanks! That would be a great help.” Sir George seemed a bit reluctant to rely this much on me.

Don’t worry, rely as much on me as you want. “To me, this is also part of the study experience here in the city. You can think of me as an adjutant apprentice.”

“Hm, an adjutant apprentice. I guess that works. Knights often have children or relatives who are their prospective successors assisting them with their work.”

“Yes, please think of me that way then. We are blood relatives after all.”

As I jokingly expressed my loyalty by bowing with a stiff expression, the overly serious soldier started laughing. If Mother Yae had seen us, she most definitely would have fainted.

“Haha. You’re promising. I’ll count on you, Ash!”

It looked like I had gotten a step closer to him. Hopefully he was going to let his guard down more and more. And eventually, I hoped he would end up repaying my favors with even bigger ones. I did not care whether he was going to act on behalf of some sort of honor or obligation as my senior as long as he helped me accomplish my ulterior motives.

My ulterior motives concealed themselves more and more as the days passed. I had become extremely busy since I had started assisting Sir George. At first, I had only helped with simple tasks, but as he realized what I was capable of, my responsibilities snowballed. As a result, it felt like I was not just treated like an apprentice, but had actually become an adjutant. *Even the subordinates have started bringing me documents, so I don’t think I’m just overly self-conscious.*

All the soldiers under Sir George’s command were part of the volunteer troops. As such, they also had to attend classes, unlike the reserve troops. Nonetheless, my past-life memories seemed to give me an edge over them. Whenever they noticed me, they rushed over with an expression of relief on their faces. Although I was a generous soul, I thought about introducing a kindness loan system and starting to charge high interests for my favors.

While I kept telling myself trivial jokes like that, I wrote down a summary of today’s work results. I was currently working on a report regarding the manufacturing of new equipment and repair of damaged items requested by one of the craftsmen at the atelier. Of course, I was not going to commit any fraud by inflating the charges or such, but was it really okay to leave such an important task to a relative you had just met?

“Have you finished?” My roommate, Lord Arthur, was peeking over my shoulder. I was now doing overtime work at home in my room at the dormitory.



Sir George was indeed extremely busy...

“Sorry for working here in our room.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’ve heard from my dear brother Itsuki how busy Sir George is.” Lord Arthur picked up the report and looked at it. “Besides, it’s easy to read. It seems very informative. Can I ask you a few things?”

Lord Arthur leaned in to ask me some questions regarding the parts in tabular form. It appeared they did not know how to read those. When we had first met, they had been quite nervous, but recently we had grown closer. It seemed that they enjoyed learning from me about things they did not know. Since they had let their guard down, I needed to be careful so that Lord Arthur’s secret would not be revealed prematurely.

Actually, there had been an instance recently where it was awfully close. *I don’t want to say exactly what it was, but let’s just say there was awkward physical contact when Arthur had leaned in over me.* However, since we had both not yet reached puberty, it would not have been noticeable unless you were overly conscious of it. So, in the end, I was probably the only one embarrassed by it.

“I see. You can use this table to compile a register of the equipment in the warehouse.”

“Yes, I think that is probably the best way to go about it. Have you asked the others for their opinion?”

“There haven’t been any concrete opinions so far. The discussion was also a bit all over the place, so we probably need more time.”

I replied with a nod to Lord Arthur’s awkward smile.

I had asked my comrades who had helped me collect documents relating to composting to look over my draft for the improved management process and point out any problems. Mother Yae had shown an unrivaled enthusiasm once she learned that it was going to be of help to Sir George.

After apologetically reporting that the group was still in the middle of making sense of the draft, Lord Arthur spoke with a cheerful smile. “Even though it’s

just the four of us, Mother Yae, Maika, Reina, and me, our opinions differ wildly. I knew there were many points of view out there, but it's great experiencing it firsthand."

"I know what you are trying to say. It seems obvious, but once you hear an unexpected opinion, you still end up surprised."

"Exactly. It feels great. It's a lot of fun."

That was also one of the reasons why I loved reading books.

It was unusual for Lord Arthur to talk so passionately about anything, so I tried expanding on the subject. "I think it feels so good because it lets you know that there are other people out there, different from yourself."

"Other people? What do you mean?"

The conversation had been side-tracked. In an instant, Lord Arthur's passion had disappeared. It was replaced not by anger, but rather an air of sadness and restraint. After all, they were a young girl pretending to be a boy, so maybe the expression "other people" had provoked a reaction.

Seeing that expression made me more empathetic. I grew impatient as I wondered what I could say to bring back *her* genuine, unrestrained smile. Unknowingly, I had stepped on a landmine. If I had been a top-class gentleman, I could have diffused the situation with a joke, but unfortunately, I was merely an apprentice in that regard. I decided to just explain it away like I always did.

"It means that you are not on your own. And not being alone brings comfort to people."

Humans were social animals. One of our traits was that we felt calmer in a group than being by ourselves.

"But having other people around you can also lead to fights. Aren't there also benefits to being alone?" she countered.

I was not able to deny that statement. If humans had subsisted merely by relying on their natural instincts, they would not have evolved to be this top-heavy with ideas.

"You are right. There will always be people with whom you will not get along,

and as a result, there will be times where you will end up hurt from having others around you.”

“So, it’s not worth it after all...” She let out a heavy sigh as if my confirmation had hurt her feelings.

Had she expected me to deny it? Unfortunately, I was not the type of person who could just easily go with the flow and deny something that I knew was true.

“Yes, there are times when things do not go as planned, or there is some kind of trouble or obstacle because of others...”

I firmly believe, for example, that I would have already started on my compost experiment if it wasn’t for the troublesome existence of other people. But I also firmly believed what I said next.

“However, it is not fair to focus solely on the bad points of having other people around. We are only talking like this because we are interacting with other people. I have received valuable advice from others when I told them what I intend to do. And I feel blessed because of that.”

Mrs. Yuika had taught me the pleasure of interacting with others in an attempt to prevent any friction with my surroundings due to selfishness and complacency. Now it was my turn to reach out to Lord Arthur’s delicate soul with words coming from the bottom of my heart.

“I am happy that I get to interact with you. I enjoy every moment we get to talk like this, study together, share meals, and laugh at each other’s jokes. And I imagine it must be quite difficult for you to deal with someone as odd as me, who keeps spouting nonsense.” I could not help but let out a self-deprecating smile. I pitied everyone who had to interact with me. Although I had no intention of letting them get away.

“Not at all! I mean, you do say strange things, but I enjoy your company. I’m glad we met and—”

At that moment, she caught her breath as if she had just come to a sudden realization. It seemed that she had noticed the benefits of having others around while vehemently arguing against my self-depreciation.

I smiled at her surprised face. "I am glad that is how you feel."

"Was this your intention all along?" As she pouted her lips and stared at me with upturned eyes, she looked very feminine.

However, she had read too much into my statements if she thought that it was my intention to lead her to this realization.

"By no means! I am not that good a rhetorician, and I cannot read your mind."

"Is that so? I can't help but think you might just be able to."

"You are overestimating me. But I knew you would eventually realize having others around is not all bad."

"Why?"

I let out a quiet laugh thinking of the obvious answer. "You have talked to me every day since we met, even though I am in fact another person." *Besides, I don't think a complete misanthrope would've been able to bear sharing a room with someone else.*

Maika's Perspective

Let's go visit Ash! That was the wonderful idea I came up with as I was getting bored in my dorm room.

"Maika, it's already after dinner! You shouldn't visit the boy's area without a good reason!"

I had anticipated Reina saying this, so I had prepared a reason. "I want to ask Ash something regarding the warehouse management proposal for George. I don't think I'll be able to sleep if I can't resolve my concerns!"

As I answered with a smile, Reina shook her head. "You two really are childhood friends."

Really? Hehe, I'm flattered.

"It really takes someone like you to be on equal footing with Ash. Take care. If that is your reason for going out, then I don't think even my mother would oppose you."

“See you later!”

“But don’t stay out too long. You should come back before the bell rings to turn off all lights.”

“Yes, Mom—I mean... Yes, Reina.”

“Maika?”

I shook off her doubting look and rushed out to the corridor. I heard her scolding me from behind to not slam the door and not run in the corridors. No wonder I mistakenly called her “Mom.” Apparently, there were some boys who referred to her as “older sister.” I wondered if having an older sister would have felt anything like this.

After I walked down the stairs, I asked the servant guarding the lobby for permission to enter the boy’s area. Once I had his approval, I headed towards the door at the far back and knocked before entering. As usual, I found Ash sitting at his desk with Arthur observing him from behind. How I envied him!

“Maika? What brings you here?”

“I think I know, but you shouldn’t be here this late, Maika!”

Ash greeted me with a calm and radiant smile. Arthur, who was aware of proper etiquette for ladies, on the other hand, had put on a forced smile.

“I want to ask you something, Ash! Do you have time?”

“Is it urgent?”

Not really urgent at all. Judging from the papers laid out on the desk in front of Ash, it seemed that he was helping George again.

“Uhm... Something’s been bothering me and I just wanted to talk about it so I wouldn’t have trouble falling asleep, but it can wait until tomorrow... Yeah, let’s talk tomorrow!”

It was unfortunate, but I didn’t want to selfishly interrupt Ash’s work! Yes, very unfortunate!

“In that case, can you wait a moment? I will go ask Mrs. Rihn to bring these documents to Sir George so I can have some time.”

“No, don’t worry about it if you’re busy! You must be tired too! I’ll just go back for today!”

“No, it is fine. I have just finished this task, and I do not want you to have trouble sleeping, so I will leave it here for today. A lack of sleep is bad for your concentration, which will also impact your studies. Besides, it is not good for your skin either.” Ash was smiling.

Oh, my gods! I can’t believe how nice he is! I’m so lucky! “Are you sure? I’m more than happy to talk to you, but I don’t want you to push yourself.”

“Of course, I am not pushing myself at all. Well, please excuse me for a moment then. You can wait here with Arthur.”

“Okay!”

As I waved at Ash, who was about to leave the room with the documents in his hands, I realized that now was my chance to practice being his wife.

“Take care, Ash!”

“I will see you later.”

Ah... Just like a married couple...

“Maika? Maika, are you alright? You look happy, so I think you’re fine, but I’m a bit worried that you’re not moving at all.”

“What? Oh! Hi, Arthur!”

“Hello...? I’m glad you’re fine.”

Don’t worry I just tend to become unaware of my surroundings when I get excited! “Looks like it’s just the two of us now.”

“Good grief... Yeah, looks like it.” Arthur seemed to hold back some grievances as he let out a sigh. But he also looked like he was having fun.

The room was organized and tidy. I knew that Ash liked to keep things clean, but it seemed Arthur was the same.

“You don’t seem to have a lot of stuff.”

“Well, I have most of my things in my room back at the mansion. Especially all the larger objects are kept there.”

Ash, on the other hand, had accumulated a lot of things around the desk. Most of it was paper, like his research notes or plans. Stuff like that tended to pile up fast.

“Neither of you seem to keep many clothes. The girls have been anxious to see you two in new outfits.”

They were both handsome after all. I had heard many girls say that they wanted to see them in all kinds of outfits. Of course, I was one of them.

“I’ve got no plans on buying any new clothes. I had these ones just made when I arrived here.”

“Oh, I see. Your fans are going to be disappointed.”

There was no point in asking Ash since I already knew what he would say. If he had money to buy new clothes, he would have preferred to use it on his research or on delicious food.

By the way, there’s something that has been catching my attention in this room.

“Maika? What are you looking at? There’s nothing over there.”

Arthur was lying. There was not nothing. Ash’s bed was over there!

“I, Maika, have become tired from standing for so long.”

“Do you want to sit down on the chair?”

“No, the chairs belong to you and Ash.”

“Ash is not here now, so it’s fine if you sit down.”

“But he’s going to come back right away. And since I still have to ask him something, there won’t be enough chairs then.”

Arthur’s face turned red and he stared at me with scornful eyes. “Maika, I know what you’re thinking, but don’t you think that’s a bit improper?”

I agreed, but Ash’s bed was right in front of my eyes. And besides, there was someone else who used the same bed in this room!

“Haven’t you sat on the bed before, Arthur? Next to Ash?”

“Yeah, but I’m his roommate... and I’m a boy? I don’t see any problem there...”

But I do. “That’s not fair! If someone other than Ash can sit on it, surely so can I!”

“But you’re a girl...”

“You can sit next to me. That would solve the problem, no?”

“No, that would make it worse! I’m a boy after all!”

I mean, yeah, it seems like you’re a boy, but... Well, anyway. “Either way, since Ash isn’t here to stop me, I’ll just sit down. I don’t see why I shouldn’t.”

“Precisely because he isn’t here to stop you!”

As I tried to quickly sit down, Arthur caught my hand to draw me back. He was fast. Since he was vigorously pulling my arm, I could no longer sit down.

“Just let me sit! It’s not fair that you can sit here but I can’t!”

“No! I won’t give in! You shouldn’t be doing this!”

“Argh, I won’t let you have Ash all to yourself.”

“I understand that it may seem unfair, but you need Ash’s permission!”

Arthur was unusually strong. Normally he was a pushover, but today I just couldn’t get past him. Meanwhile, footsteps were approaching from the corridor. Ash had returned.

“No! Time’s up!”

“Yes! I win!”

While I was hanging my head in frustration, Arthur struck a victory pose. We both let out a deep breath. I had missed my chance to sit down on Ash’s bed! I was about to break out in tears, but...

“Oh well!”

Seeing Arthur’s smile, I forgot all my regret.

“What is it, Maika?”

Arthur had a bright smile on his flushed face covered in sweat.

"I'm still extremely disappointed that I couldn't sit down on Ash's bed, but seeing you smile made it worth it."

"My smile?"

"Yeah, your smile right now."

It was no longer a smile hiding his pain or suffering. It was no longer an attempt to suppress his desire to cry or seek help.

"Do you enjoy being around Ash?"

It seemed like Arthur didn't understand what I was trying to say, but he tried his best to answer. "Yeah, I have fun. We're friends after all."

"Yeah, I can see that."

"But just now, I smiled because of you, didn't I?"

"Because I'm your friend too!"

"...I know." Slightly embarrassed, Arthur acknowledged our friendship.

As we were talking, Ash entered the room. "Sorry for making you wait! You both look like you are having fun!" Ash couldn't hold back that comment when he saw both our faces.

"Of course! We're friends after all!" I winked at Arthur, who grew increasingly embarrassed.

"Yeah, we're friends, so it's normal we're having fun," he backed me up.

"I am glad you get along so well! Well, Maika, what is it you wanted to ask?" Ash briefly glanced at his chair and the bed before looking at me. "But we should sit down first! Do you want the chair or the bed, Maika?"

"The bed!"

"Go ahead."

Yay! Ash's bed!

"Wait a minute, Ash! You're just going to let her sit there?!"

Arthur, the keeper of the bed, could not restrain himself from crying out.

Tonight, I was invited for dinner at Sir George's house. He had proposed to celebrate since we had completed the first stage of reorganizing the equipment, and I was more than happy to oblige. On the occasion, he also wanted to talk about more private matters, which we had not been able to do so far.

Sir George lived in a small residence. Since it was a wooden construction, it looked more like the dwelling of a samurai rather than a knight. When I knocked, it was not a servant but Sir George himself who opened the door.

"Welcome, Ash! Make yourself at home."

"Thank you again for the gracious invitation. I am honored to set foot in your house."

"Hm, you're as formal as always. You can relax a bit—we're just having dinner as relatives."

"I will take you up on your offer."

Following his lead, I walked to the living room. No one else seemed to be here. So, it was not so much that he had come to greet me himself, but rather that he was alone. I wondered if there was no maid living with him. Was this how all knights lived in the city? I thought they were considered upper class too. Regardless, there was plenty of food on the table. Probably more than I could eat.

"Is there anything you can't eat? I ended up choosing food which I usually have with my military friends."

"It looks delicious!"

The meat dishes radiated light brown. I had expected nothing less from a soldier reliant on a strong physique. My body was about to break into dance from seeing all this food which was going to support its growth.

Sir George started laughing. "What a childlike joy! Eat as much as you want! You really helped me out immensely. As long as you enjoy the meal, I'll be happy too!"

"I had no intention of holding back with such a feast in front of my eyes!"

I sat down feeling like my stomach had expanded tenfold and I was not able

to think of anything other than filling it up until I was full. Still, I had not forgotten about the package in my hand.

“Before I forget, I brought you something from Mother Yae.”

When I had casually asked Mother Yae a couple of days ago if she wanted me to relay a message, she had ended up bringing me a homemade dish for Sir George. That made me realize how serious she was.

“Oh, from Mother Yae? She’s always thinking of me.”

“Oh, really?”

It seemed like this was not the first time she had made a move. And it also seemed like he was well aware of her intentions. *I’m going to lean into this and put Mother Yae in my debt by providing her some unsolicited assistance.* But first, I was going to enjoy this meal.

“May I start eating?”

“Yeah, I’m quite hungry too!”

Sorry, Mother Yae.

I was not able to concentrate on anything but my appetite. The debt trade would have to wait. In the end, all people were driven by their hunger for delicious food.

Once my stomach had been filled up, my focus had cleared up again. Well, mostly anyway. There may have been some mischievous thoughts left.

I talked with Sir George while drinking ale. It contained hops and had more of a bitter taste than the sour homebrew ale at our village.



“I’m still a bit shocked by your abilities, Ash. I had heard David talk about you before, but you are wiser than I imagined.”

“All thanks to Father Folke who taught me so many things.”

I blamed Father Folke for all my peculiarities. He was an exemplar of a fellow researcher.

“I can see why Mother Yae would have said that she had never seen anyone as talented before. I’ve never seen anyone as young and gifted either.”

Don’t flatter me too much.

Since he had brought up Mother Yae, I tried asking about her. “By the way, are you close with Mother Yae? She was very enthusiastic when she gave me her homemade dish as a present for you.”

Maybe I had been a bit too frank. Sir George showed a bitter expression unrelated to the taste of the ale.

“Hm... She’s taken a liking to someone as rustic as me.”

Although I realized that this sounded rude, it came as a surprise to me that he was not the kind of obstinate person who did not notice a woman’s feelings.

“To someone young like me, she appears to be an intelligent and beautiful woman. What do you think, Sir Geo—Baleas?” I tried calling him by his first name to emphasize the casual nature of the conversation.

“I agree, she’s a charming woman.”

It did not sound like an empty compliment. I wondered if there was any reason for his celibacy.

“It may not be my place, and I do not want to impose myself too much, so do not feel obligated to answer, but... Is there a reason why you are still single?”

“Lord Itsuki and my colleagues ask me that all the time. Going for a drink as an unmarried man at this age makes you feel embarrassed.”

“Please excuse me for interrupting our pleasant dinner with such a tactless question.”

I tried changing the subject by apologizing for my rudeness, but Sir George

nonchalantly explained himself with a mature bitterness on his face.

“I can’t forget my first love. It’s pathetic that I still have some lingering attachment, but that’s the reason.”

What a catch he was. Not only did he look good and was a hard worker, but on top of it all he also had a pure heart! He was a knight straight out of a story.

“I am sorry for prying, but that has piqued my interest.”

“Haha, I’m afraid I won’t give you any details so easily, even if you’re my nephew.”

How heartless! I looked at him with puppy dog eyes, but Sir George just laughed and drank up his ale.

“What a pity... If you ever feel like it, I would love to hear the story. You do not need to promise, just remember that I am interested.”

“Well, keep waiting for now.”

As long as he did not outright refuse it, there was a chance of hearing it someday. Judging from his reaction, there was some hope, albeit very meager.

While pouring himself another drink, Sir George returned the question with a teasing look. If I had a camera with me, I would have loved to take a picture of his face to show to Mother Yae as an act of good faith.

“What about you, Ash? You’re smart, and considering you come from a farm, your fighting skills are nothing to laugh at either. I’m sure you’re popular with the girls.”

“Unfortunately, there is no love interest for me at the moment.”

“Really? You are quite friendly with Ms. Maika.”

“We are childhood friends after all.”

She has indeed become a very capable person and a childhood friend whom I am fond of. Our encounter must have been a blessing of the gods.

“That’s not what I meant...” Sir George did not seem happy with my perfectly honest reply. “But maybe that’s your weak spot. You are still quite young and inexperienced.” Somehow, he had just explained his own doubts away. “Alright,

while you're here consider me your foster parent. Let's have some real men's talk tonight."

"That sounds reassuring."

He had declared himself my foster parent. If all he wanted in return was some conversation, I did not mind.

"Do you have a preferred type of girl?"

"Of course." How rude. I was neither withered nor unprincipled. "I think I am attracted to the type of person who is fun to be around and who stimulates me to do better."

In this world, Mrs. Yuika was probably the most fitting of that type. Nothing compared to the feeling of being in the palm of her hands. Of course, I only felt that way because she had my best interests in mind. I do not think I would have been attracted to a wicked woman who only wanted to trap me. At the very least, I preferred Mrs. Yuika's gentle style. Unfortunately, she was already married and much older than me.

"How about Ms. Maika then?"

"I think she is a wonderful person."

She was cheerful, intelligent, and attentive to others' concerns. On top of that, she was reliable, and I enjoyed her company. Besides, she was undoubtedly going to turn into a beautiful woman, since she had inherited the genes of her parents, Mrs. Yuika and Mr. Klein.

"You seem to value her highly. Have you ever thought about approaching her in a romantic way?"

"No, I do not see her that way."

She was too young, or rather, too immature. Having my past-life memories, I just could not see myself developing romantic feelings for her without turning into a lolicon. Yes, this world operated on a different set of values. I was at an age where engagement and marriage were imminent. Understandably so if you considered the dreadfully low life expectancy. However, I was too decent to simply give in to that way of thinking. Sometimes virtue stood in the way of

happiness. Physically, we were both the same age, and I had gotten used to this world to a point where it was probably possible for me to adapt my thinking and make it work. At the same time, I had no pressing desire to fall in love.

“There are so many other things I want to do at the moment—I am not really focused on falling in love.”

“I had sort of expected that answer. And I can see your point of view...” Sir George took a sip from his glass. He shrugged his shoulders as he remembered a bitter experience from his past. “But if you keep putting things off, all wonderful women will slowly end up out of your reach.”

“Your expression is quite convincing.”

It was the face of a person who had come to terms with their regrets while at the same time bashfully longing for a long-forgotten past. I looked forward to hearing the story of his first love someday.

As I quietly wondered if I was going to end up like him, a smile crept over my face. “I think your advice is right, but at the moment I can only act according to my desires. Such is life for the likes of us.” Without asking, I included him in the same category.

He folded his arms and frowned, looking slightly upset. After glaring at me for a while, he burst out into laughter. “Not saying it’s good or bad, but you’re absolutely right.”

“We are good at getting work done, but we are not very skilled regarding those matters. As a result, we are having a hard time and going through a lot of painful experiences.”

“Yeah, there’s a lot of trouble. But nothing can be done about it. This is the only way we know how to live.”

“How about we just enjoy those hardships, then, while living our best lives?”

Sir George filled up both our glasses to the brim with ale. “Yeah, let’s enjoy ourselves.”

“Let us start with this drink.”

I gulped down the ale at the same pace as Sir George. I did not like the taste

that much, but I enjoyed having a drink over a good conversation. I could not wait to get to the age when bitter things started to taste better.

“But, Baleas. You may have missed your chance with a wonderful person in the past, but you still have Mother Yae.”

“You’re still going on about that?”

“Just listen to it for my sake.”

Sir George reluctantly gave in and started listening to the words of the person to whom he owed a great debt. Or, in other words, he was not capable of declining any favors. What a clumsy person indeed.

“I do not know what your true feelings are, but I can take a guess. The same goes for Mother Yae, and I cannot help but root for her.”

Not for her sake, but for mine. It was beyond inconvenient that I could not take out any books from the library without Mother Yae’s approval. As I had stated earlier, I wanted him to listen for *my* sake.

“Mother Yae assisted me in various ways. Among others, she helped me write up the process for the warehouse management.” The overly serious Sir George started groaning when he realized that he was also indebted to her. “And you should probably pay her back for the delicious homemade dish that I brought on her behalf today.”

His groan grew louder. It looked like he did not know what to say.

If I had told him to consider taking her as his wife, he could have just said that he did not feel like it. However, he was unable to refute my call to show his gratitude.

As I gloated over my distant uncle breaking out into a cold sweat, his complexion suddenly changed. “But I’m quite busy,” he gave as an excuse.

“Has not your workload settled down right now?” I successfully deflected his counterattack. *I won’t let you get away this easily.*

Now it was my turn to attack. “There is no need to overthink this. I am not telling you to get married. It will be more than enough if you casually invite her out for dinner as a friend. Just think of it as showing your gratitude for all the

favors she has done for you.”

He sent me a spiteful look as I appraised Mother Yae as a friend of his. I was basically putting her in the same category as the wonderful person whom he had let get away. There was no doubt that he thought of Mother Yae as more than friends, and I would not have wanted it any other way. *Go ahead and get as close as possible.*

“Do you not want to thank a friend who goes through so much effort for you?”

“She’s not really my friend... I mean, she kind of is... but it’s complicated...”

“So, you do not want to thank her?”

“No, I didn’t say that.”

Of course. “How about you ask Mother Yae out for dinner as a thank you?”

“Maybe it’s better if I just sent her a gift... I don’t know of any stylish restaurant where I could take her.”

“Leave it to me! Chef Yacoo’s restaurant is supposed to be excellent. I made a reservation for you.”

“You *made*?”

Yes, made. *In the past tense. Is there a problem?*

“Obviously, I still need to check with both your schedules... but it seems that you have a day off the day after tomorrow. Incidentally, Mother Yae is free on the same day.”

“You’ve already booked the table?!”

“As an adjutant apprentice, I need to be aware of my superior’s schedule.”
Just go have dinner with her at least once.

Mother Yae was still young, but in terms of this world, she was already late at getting married. Since that was mostly due to her love interest’s indecisiveness, the least that he could have done was to take responsibility and make a decision. Whether he ended up making her cry by embracing her or rejecting her was up to Sir George.

I was merely an observer.

My second meeting with Lord Itsuki took place in his office. He looked like he had lost weight. This past month must have been extremely exhausting. *I should ask Chef Yacoo about his meal plan. Maybe I can get him to make some more energizing meals. If Lord Itsuki collapses, all my scheming will have been for nothing.*

While ruminating on the count's health, I took over from Sir George to finish off our presentation regarding the re-examination of the equipment management. "The proposal you just heard has been compiled with the input from five insiders serving under Sir George's supervision of the equipment management as well as four outsiders from the academy and the temple. My Lord, we would love for you to take this proposal into consideration."

Lord Itsuki nodded with a blank expression as I handed him the written proposal. He seemed like a different person compared to our first meeting, where he was fawning over Lady Maika. "I gladly accept it," he said. "Judging from your presentation, it seems that there are several advantages to this new method. I will get back to you once I have gone over it myself in more detail." Now that business was over, his expression lightened up a bit as he looked at Sir George. "Why is this child... Why is Ash here? And why did he do the presentation?"

"Please forgive my poor presentation skills," I said.

Lord Itsuki replied with a gentler look on his face after seeing me bow my head to apologize. "Don't worry, your presentation was excellent. I was just surprised."

As he had praised me, I once again bowed to show my gratitude. This time Lord Itsuki, who had kept his composure until now, could not help but smile. Even Sir George showed one of his rare smiles, which usually never surfaced during business hours.

"Then you'll be even more surprised to hear that it was Ash who originally came up with the proposal and wrote it up himself. He understands it much better than I do," Sir George declared.

"Are you serious? Baleas, look me in the eyes!" The count's tone had now

completely changed, and he fixated on Sir George's eyes. "Hm, it doesn't seem like you're joking. I'm relieved. The day you start joking, we will be on the brink of apocalypse and dragons will start soaring through the sky."

"Excuse me, but I know how to tell a joke."

"Well, go on then. Amuse me."

Sir George was at a loss for words after hearing the playful provocation. These two got along quite well for master and servant.

Noticing me left out of the conversation, Lord Itsuki seemed to return to his normal self with an awkward smile. "Sorry about that. Baleas and I used to be classmates at the academy. That's why we get along so well."

"I see. I assume that is also why you have so much faith in him."

"Of course, I'm able to separate public from private matters when I have to, but Baleas here is the most preposterously serious man in the city. I can guarantee that as his friend."

It made sense now why Sir George received preferential treatment. He was indeed a deeply earnest person. Even now, he seemed unsure what to say in response to the slightly backhanded compliment.

"Well, it must be true then if our Baleas here is saying it. And my amazement keeps growing." Lord Itsuki bent over, gazing into my eyes, bringing his handsome face close to mine. "After hearing the rumors from my dear sister and brother-in-law, I expected an intelligent young man, but I assumed that that intelligence was going to be more proportionate to your age."

"He took me by surprise too. He served me more than well as my adjutant. Even Mother Yae has praised his quick wit."

The statesman seemed even more impressed upon hearing the name of Mother Yae being mentioned. "You really are a gifted person," he said. "I can't let such outstanding talent go unrewarded. Especially after you helped out my good friend and chief vassal Sir George. Organizing equipment is not a fun task even with a bonus salary..."

It appeared that Lord Itsuki was well aware of how difficult Sir George's task

was. His willingness to offer a reward showed his benevolence as a superior. And I was willing to take advantage of it.

“In that case, would it be possible to ask you for a favor instead of a reward?” I asked.

“Let us hear your wish first.” His face became tense again.

You don't have to be so formal. This reward won't cost you even a single grain of wheat. “You should have received another proposal from the dormitory supervisor, Mrs. Rihn. I would just ask you to prioritize that proposal.”

“A proposal from Mrs. Rihn? Let me have a look around. This month I've been putting off everything non-urgent, so I don't even know who's been bringing what.” He started excavating the mountain of papers on his desk. “I've just finished the report on the production output from all the areas under my jurisdiction. I've not touched anything else that has been piling up since then.”

“You seem to be even busier than I expected,” I remarked.

I would have loved to supply him with energy drinks if they had been sold here. I wondered if I could make something similar.

“I think I found it... Experiments for agricultural improvement? Why did Mrs. Rihn bring me this?”

It sounded strange indeed to read the word “agriculture” in a proposal from a waiting lady and academy supervisor.

The slightly confused Lord Itsuki looked up as he came to a sudden realization. “Wait. Since you wanted me to read this, does that mean that you wrote it?”

“I put it together with the help of Maika, Reina, Arthur, and Mother Yae as a part of our studies at the academy. We would appreciate it if you could examine it.”

Finally, I was able to press the matter. I wanted to start my experiments in spring. I was already making compost with the help of a livestock farmer with whom I had become acquainted, so if the fermentation process went smoothly, I could have started after a short delay.

As I envisioned those prospects with a sense of accomplishment, Lord Itsuki's

voice brought me back to reality. “Do you just want me to read this? If so, that is quite a cheap reward.”

“I do not think it is cheap at all to have you use your valuable time and prioritize this task.” Those were my true intentions, but I would not have said no to a bonus reward either. “If you are willing to extend any more generosity towards me, I would appreciate it if you could help me out with the budget if the project is approved.”

“What an unselfish answer. No word about the approval itself.”

“I think there will be no problem in that regard if you judge it fairly and logically.”

I had put a lot of effort into the project, but I did not consider it to be perfect. If there were a valid reason to reject it, I would have accepted my failure. Of course, I was not going to stop there in that case. I would just have to address those reasons and improve it.

Seemingly impressed by my overflowing ardor, Lord Itsuki smiled gently at Sir George. “Baleas, it appears that your seriousness runs in the family.”

I’m not as pure as Sir George, though.

As I frowned at this exaggerated comparison, Sir George followed suit. “I’m nowhere near as intelligent as Ash.”

Going by Lord Itsuki’s laugh, we may have been more similar than we both thought.

It took five days for the project to be approved by the acting count. Since I planned on using compost made from animal feces, which had been taboo until now, I received strict instructions to only use the kitchen garden at the dormitory. Later, I learned that there had been quite some disagreements and the project was almost rejected. However, thanks to the assistance of several people, it had somehow ended up receiving approval. Mother Yae had vouched for the legitimacy of the sources, Mrs. Rihn had attested to my meticulousness, Chef Yacoo had affirmed my expertise of food, and Sir George had advocated for my seriousness. All together we had overcome the council’s opposition. I

felt like my credibility had maybe gone up a bit too much, but it seemed that the seeds I had sown were starting to bear fruits. *Strength lies in numbers, after all.*

The approval of the plan for agricultural improvement, including the use of animal manure as fertilizer, brought about two changes. First, since it was officially recognized by the count, we were awarded a development budget. Second, we were able to enlist helpers. That was all. It was nothing big.

Incidentally, there was a saying that “money makes the world go round.” There were not many things that could not be bought with money. And even for the few exceptions, it was usually possible to obtain them making full use of the power of money. It also went without saying that manpower was essential. The punch of a single person was not able to kill a bear, but the punches of ten thousand people would have been able to.

So, all in all, was it really nothing big to obtain both money and manpower? I was reminded that there had been so many things that I had not been able to do since coming to the city because I was lacking these two. Now it was possible to do all these things, however insignificant they may have been.

Using a white cloth as a makeshift mask, I observed the cloudy liquid bubbling inside a large bottle. I had to admit that I must have looked a little suspicious. If it had not been in a garden in broad daylight, but in a cavern at night, it might have incited a witch hunt. Luckily, it was nice weather, which helped to further mitigate the dubious aspects of my undertaking. An unknowing stranger may have perceived me as a benevolent witch concocting some medicine for the good of mankind.

“What are you doing here?”

Nonetheless, Mrs. Rihn’s voice was filled with wariness as she approached us. Behind me, the maid with impeccable posture and composure was bending herself over to get a look at our experiment. It seemed that we had piqued her interest.

“It is nothing of importance.” *So you don’t have to show me such an unusual posture.*

Mrs. Rihn responded with a slow but firm headshake to my smile. “Ash, I’m sure most people would say it’s probably of great importance if you are working on it.”

“You think too highly of me.”

It was rare to hear Mrs. Rihn speak jokingly. After I played off her remark, she averted her eyes and looked at Lady Reina, who had been observing me from the beginning. Lady Reina opened her mouth, presumably to start explaining, but closed it again in resignation shortly after. The daughter and mother now both shifted their gaze towards Lord Arthur, who had also been observing me on the side. Lord Arthur just smiled awkwardly at both of them, shaking their head with both arms stretched out in capitulation. The three of them then looked at the last stronghold, Lady Maika. Unlike them, Lady Maika stood right next to me with a white cloth mask on her face. As my assistant, she was noting down the reaction inside the large bottle. She was in another league. She was a dear collaborator and supporter.

“Hehe, you’ve all still got a lot to learn.” She narrowed her eyes as she happily and proudly expressed her opinion. “Once you understand Ash better, you know that it’s not just ‘probably’ of great importance. Everything he does is a big deal!”

You too, Maika?!

But really? “Everything”? Even if I conceded for the sake of argument, that was an overstatement. The other three looked convinced, though. *Someone, please object!*

I needed to explain myself. Otherwise I risked the whole city treating me like an exclusive specialty import. “You are all exaggerating. I am just manufacturing what is necessary for hygiene control according to our plan.”

I was just following the steps detailed in the plan we had all put together. There was no need to mentally distance themselves. *Isn’t this supposed to be our shared project?*

As I was appealing to my fellow project members, two of them, Lady Reina and Lord Arthur, disagreed simultaneously.

“You’re right that we agreed to sanitary measures because we are dealing with waste material. Both common sense and our references dictate that there is a need to have a means to keep proper hygiene...” Lady Reina began.

“But Ash, the consumables you are making right now are extremely rare even at the capital. More than half of the articles in circulation are reserved for the royal family,” Lord Arthur concluded.

In that case, I’m sure you could say that they are in fact in circulation.

Hearing Lord Arthur’s statement, Mrs. Rihn frowned with an even uneasier look on her face. “Arthur, are you by any chance implying that *that* rare, exclusive article monopolized by the royal family is currently being made right in front of our eyes?”

“I’m afraid so.”

What else would they be implying? It seemed that Mrs. Rihn may have been slightly fatigued.

It was the first time that I had heard about the royal family monopolizing hygiene products, but it made sense. After all, there was no soap to be found anywhere in this city.

“You’re making soap?!” After learning what I was making, Mrs. Rihn raised her voice to a volume which I had never heard from her.

“You are exaggerating again. It is only something that cleans your skin and clothes.” As I explained the simplicity of its purpose, Lord Arthur was the only one who agreed with an awkward smile.

Mrs. Rihn seemed to be speechless, but I figured I was imagining things. Similarly, Lady Reina was definitely not just blankly staring into the distance.

“Ash? It looks like the reaction is over!” Lady Maika assisted me in a good mood.

We had reached a point where I needed to be extremely careful in handling the soap, so I shut out all external stimuli to focus on the process. The bubbling cloudy liquid was the result of a reaction between fried eggshells and water.

Heating eggshells at high temperatures turned them into a substance called

quicklime. If you added water to that substance, it produced a chemical reaction generating a temperature of over 100 degrees Celsius, altering the quicklime into slaked lime. At this point, both the slaked lime as well as the water were highly alkaline, requiring utmost care to avoid any contact with eyes or skin. Adding firewood ashes—which I had stolen from the kitchen—dissolved in water to this aqueous solution produced potassium hydroxide. This further increased the alkaline levels, making it even more dangerous. So much so that, if a human bathed in this water, they would have probably turned into soap themselves.

Finally, mixing the potassium hydroxide solution with tallow and vegetable oil is what created the soap. For liquid soap, you first needed to heat it up again to get the desired result. However, at this stage it was still extremely dangerous, since beneath the human skin there was quite a lot of fat. In other words, if you drenched a person with a potassium hydroxide solution, they were going to turn into soap from head to toe. *Did you know that? I didn't until I read it in a book.*

Seeing that my experiment had produced a viscous liquid soap, it seemed that my sources were accurate. I assumed the same applied to the “human soap,” although I did not plan on trying that out. *Who would've thought that soap was this scary?*

“As always, I will first test this on myself to see if it is safe.”

It really took me a long time to get to this point. I had wanted to make soap for a while since I had known the manufacturing process back at the village already. Remembering the daily baths of my past life, I was writhing in agony, since I was only able to bathe in cold water after working on the fields all day long or camping in the forest for a week.

However, back at the village I had not been able to make soap. For a start, it was not possible to make quicklime, since I was limited to the eggs of wild birds, and I had no way of producing the temperature necessary to heat them. You needed about 900 degrees Celsius considering the freezing point of water was zero. If I remembered correctly, it was the same as the melting point for silver. There was no way to produce that kind of heat by burning firewood in a simple stove.

Once I had arrived in the city, charcoal had caught my eye, but even so it was not nearly enough to produce that amount of heat using regular household equipment. It would have been possible with the forge and stoves of the blacksmiths and ceramic craftsmen whom I had met through assisting Sir George, but I did not want to use their extra-high-grade work equipment simply to “heat some eggshells.” Even as a joke that would not have gone over well. My body probably would have ended up experiencing 900 degrees Celsius first-hand.

Nevertheless, that all changed with the direct approval of our agricultural improvement plan by the acting count. As a result, we were able to accumulate money, and just by showing the seal of approval, businesses gladly let us use their forges to heat eggshells. Since they had been reluctant prior to that, I intended on offering them a token of gratitude in return at a later date. Keeping future cooperation in mind, it was important to show appreciation and talk things through. *And I might even end up shedding a tear or two, just to add some emotion.*

While I was burning with a piping-hot passion, Lord Arthur tepidly touched the liquid soap with a faint smile on their face. “It feels like the real thing... Who would’ve thought that the Royche family’s secret formula could be recreated this easily?”

“Oh? So the Royche family is producing the soap in the capital?”

I could not help but wonder what formula they used. Just creating soap was not too difficult, but there were many different factors that could give it a unique touch, like the ratio of vegetable oil and tallow or what fragrance was used. Currently, I was thinking about using my signature ingredients: honey and aloe. Both could be easily obtained via the village and seemed healthy.

“I’ve heard that the Royches are a family of wealthy merchants who made it to the top by monopolizing the sales of soap.”

Let’s pretend I didn’t hear that.

The fact that a mere formula for soap could elevate you to a wealthy merchant in the capital of a nation showed how much knowledge was simply stored away. I would have expected anyone counted among the top wealthy

merchants to be dealing with gold and silver, or jewels. Although there were many examples throughout history of things like spices, tea leaves, or beans becoming highly profitable commodities, even though their value was lost on later generations.

However, soap was such a peculiar item. And how did they manage to keep the formula secret? Why did none of the surrounding businesses investigate it? How is it that no one on the inside had decided to make some easy money for themselves by leaking information? I could not shake the feeling that there had to be something more to this.

I stealthily observed Mrs. Rihn, whose blank gaze was fixated on me—I mean, the liquid soap. “I’m not sure how I should report this. In the worst case, our relations with the wealthy merchants in the capital will turn sour...”

In response to her mother’s statement, Lady Reina sent me a harsh look.

I did not believe I was at fault here, but at the same time, it felt like an apology would have created the least trouble. “How about I make some crepes for everyone?”

I tried cheering Mrs. Rihn up by offering her the dessert she loved. Most worries went away on a full stomach, especially if it was a favorite dish. After all, there were still a lot of things I needed her to do. For one, I wanted to make solid soap, which was easier to carry around and likely lasted longer, but for that I needed seaweed. And my plan was to have Mrs. Rihn ask Lord Itsuki about acquiring seaweed when she presented him with her report. Any arrangement with the wealthy merchants in the capital was out of my jurisdiction, so I was going to leave that to the statesmen. *However, if someone told me I could no longer make soap, it would be time for a discussion without any restraints. And I would put my full power on display.*

Itsuki’s Perspective

This term the academy had been very quiet considering there were two relatives of the count among the students. Usually, this would have been a cause of frequent trouble from other students behaving recklessly, but not this time around. Putting all my outstanding personnel in charge of the academy at

the risk of me drowning in the additional work had paid off. At least that's what I had thought. All the reports had been positive, saying there were no problems. However, in reality, it had not been quiet at all.

The agriculture improvement plan seemed harmless on its surface, but deep within wriggled a monster just waiting to burst out. How was the first report several days after the approval about the successful manufacturing of soap already? That was a first-round knockout.

The only reason the prudent folk of the council had half-heartedly approved this project was because they had thought that, "This won't produce any results in the next ten years anyway and will be over before it even begins." No one giving approval, including me, had anticipated that this plan was going to succeed. We had all just assumed that it was another project doomed to failure. As a result, all these self-important people now ended up looking like complete idiots, spitting out their drinks in surprise. Faced with this emergency, I had immediately called a meeting with my most trusted personnel to get a grasp on the situation.

"Can someone please explain what happened?"

This is no good. I had ended up asking in a desperate tone, making me question my own sanity. I needed to act more appropriately as the next-in-line and current acting count, put in charge by my father and dear sister.

I mustered up some strength and gave it another go. "Make it easy to understand."

Still no good. My mind was not just slowly withering away, but it had now broken in two.

"An easy-to-understand explanation..." Rihn gave my broken self a worried look.

There were many outstanding maids serving under the Count of the Sacula region, but Rihn was exceptional even among them. She was born into a family that had been producing outstanding talents for generations, and she was splendidly living up to the expectations, handling her heavy responsibilities despite her young age. She was so exceptional that I could not have found a better person to leave in charge of the academy with the prospect of not just

one but two greatly important students like Arthur and Maika.

It looked like that exceptional maid had just come up with a response as she gave a slight nod while looking at me straight in the eyes. “We are going to have a lot of work ahead of us.”

“That is easy to understand. I guess we’ll be busy.” Things were going to get rough.

By the way, Rihn, did you lose heart too? Did your mind break already? Since she was such a capable maid, she hardly ever let her emotions show. It almost made me cry to think that she had reached her limits. There was no use relying on her any further. Still, her reaction was understandable considering that the Royche family, the wealthy soap merchants, wielded their influence as subordinates of Marquis Datara. Since we lived in a remote region, it was difficult to verify all the information, but it appeared that the Royche family’s monopoly on soap production was protected by the military power and authority of the marquis. In the worst-case scenario, this had the potential to end up in a conflict with a fellow noble house. I needed to inform my father as soon as possible.

Since Rihn seemed to be taken out of the equation, I decided to question another person in the room. “You must have known about this.”

I may have come off a bit strong, but it could not be helped in this situation. I was talking to Yae, who was another one of the three people whom I had called into my office for an emergency meeting. Since she was in charge of classroom teaching, I assumed that she had known about Ash’s intentions to make soap. Considering Ash had to go through her to consult any references at the library, there was no way she didn’t.

“He really went ahead and made soap... Ash’s something else...”

Hey, it’s no time to be impressed. This is a huge problem. “Yae, do you not feel responsible at all?”

“Responsible? For what?” Her puzzled expression resembled that of my dear sister.

“I mean, it’s a problem if he suddenly starts making soap even though no one

knew the formula until now.”

“How is that a problem? The formula itself is openly available at the temple library. Although I will admit that I was unable to decipher some parts. Ash simply deciphered those parts. Besides, it appears that he’s been wanting to make soap since his time back at Noscula village. “Unpredictable” is the best word to describe Ash. In my function as priest, I plan on continuing to support him.”

That’s not what I wanted to hear. Given the current state of affairs, there was no one besides the Royches who made soap. It was the source of their huge profits, which gave them great political influence.

“I’m serving as a priest first and foremost. I will pray to the three gods for the restitution and diffusion of knowledge.”

Damn you! I’m sure you didn’t report anything because you knew I might try and stop all this! But what an interesting—I mean, preposterous development!

As I enviously glared at my grown-up cousin, she was puffed up with pride. “Besides, as a priest, I cannot overlook the monopolization of technology and knowledge by the Royche family and all the others serving Marquis Datara. As I see it, someday someone will have to destroy their stronghold. And in that case, I don’t see why it shouldn’t happen now at the hands of the Count of Sacula.”

Damn, that was cool. I almost felt inclined to agree. “That’s not what I meant. Even if I grant you that point, I still wished you would have consulted with me first.”

“I did put it in the written report. Although I’ll admit that I knew you wouldn’t have time to read it...”

“Don’t sneak all the responsibility on me...”

She used to adore me and call me her “older brother,” but it looked like she had fully become an Amanobe maiden... My mother had taught my dear sister that an Amanobe knew no defeat in love. If that had only applied to romance it would have been fine, but it seemed that, regardless of the objective, the women in our family didn’t shy away from any methods to ensure victory.

“Besides...” she began once again.

“What else?”

“There is no way to stop Ash.”

“Why? He is a polite, clever, and I would say very understanding boy. Surely you can reason with him.”

After I declared my assessment of Ash, Rihn and Yae both smirked at me as if I was an unknowing newcomer at the academy.

“What’s with that reaction? Did I say something wrong?”

I directed my question towards Baleas, the third academy staff member whom I had called to the meeting.

He replied while searching for the right words with a strained smile. “Ash is... How should I say this... He is indeed polite. And clever. But, if you asked me whether you can reason with him...”

“Definitely not.”

“Yeah, there’s no way.”

What happened, everyone? Why do you all look so enlightened?

“Be careful, Lord Itsuki.” Baleas addressed me like he would one of his soldiers heading out to their first battle. “Ash achieves everything he wants to do using his politeness and cleverness.”

Rihn and Yae both nodded along to Baleas’ words.

“Lord Itsuki, I didn’t lie when I mentioned in my report that there have been no real problems so far.”

“Nevertheless, the agriculture improvement plan has reached you. Think about that.”

Hm? What did they mean? Rihn presented that project. And Yae kept silent until now so that no one could interfere. Finally, Ash accompanied Baleas to my office to make sure that I read the plan even though I had no time on my hands. Had all three of my staff members already been enticed by Ash? And now... Now he had come for me too. This was an occasion to rejoice that my dear sister and brother-in-law were even better at picking out gifted people than I

had imagined, not shudder in fear that my worries for this year's students had been replaced with a completely different kind of chaos. *Someone, please agree.*

"There is one positive thing that has come out of all of this."

Stop it, Rihn. Don't say "one." Surely there are more positive things.

"Lord Arthur seems to enjoy himself very much in Ash's company. There really haven't been any big issues so far. In that regard, my job has been easier than expected."

"...I'm glad to hear that."

My dear sister, my dear brother-in-law, what in the world have you sent us?

• • •

After trying the liquid soap for three days on myself I did not notice any side effects like redness or itching. I concluded there were no major issues and continued my human experiments. Until now, I had always relied on Lady Maika and acquaintances for test subjects, but thanks to Lord Itsuki I was able to enlist more help. How wonderful.

"As such, this is the trial product which will help maintain sanitary conditions. I want you to help test its effectiveness."

I bowed in front of the dwellers of the shabby buildings, only slightly better than a shack, just outside the city wall. It was a powerful picture seeing them stand there in their plain clothes with a sullen expression and dirt all over them. Many had scars on their foreheads and cheeks. That was no surprise considering they all had tattoos on the nape of their necks, marking them as former criminals who were currently sentenced to prison labor.

Yes, my new recruits were prisoners. Since their punishment was to collect all the waste and garbage from the city, they were a good fit for helping me make the compost from animal feces. It just took a few written lines from Lord Itsuki to add a small task to their daily schedule.

"If your skin feels uncomfortable in any way, please stop using it and let me know. For example, if it feels itchy or it turns red."

“So you don’t just want us to handle your shit, but you also want us to test your poison.” A man in his thirties, who was considered to be the leader among the prisoners, raised his concern in a threatening voice.

“You are Belgo, right?” Belgo seemed surprised to hear me call him by his name. “You do not have to worry, I have tested it on myself to see if there were no issues, so it is not poison. However, it may not be a good fit for everyone. There could be side effects for people with sensitive skin, which I want you to help me find out.”

“I don’t understand what you’re saying. What do you want us to do?”

“I want you to use this liquid soap and wash yourselves. Just like you do when you clean off the dirt with lye.” Plant ashes were used as the main detergent in this world. They did not foam, but helped to get rid of dirt.

Belgo carefully considered my words while tilting his head in contemplation before taking the small bottle of liquid soap in his hand and examining it with an uneasy look on his face. “So you want me to rub this... thing, whatever it is, on my body?”

“It is liquid soap. To be precise, if you dilute it with water it foams...” I was not in the mood to explain it in detail. The prisoners were currently all dirty and, quite frankly, smelly, so I wanted to get started with the experiment right away. “It is faster if I just show you. Let us go outside. Come on, Belgo, you will be our first specimen.” I took his hand and led the middle-aged men outside the house.

“Hey! What’re you doing?”

“Conducting an experiment and improving your hygiene!”

Although the latter only made up about 30 percent of the plan. *Don’t resist. Keep moving along.*

I made them fill the wooden tub, where they usually bathed themselves, and had them bring clothes to use as towels. It almost felt as if I was back in my past life when I put the soap on the wet cloth and it started to foam. For some reason, the prisoners moved back one, or rather three steps. Was it that weird seeing this for the first time?

“Why are you just idly standing there, Belgo? Please take off your clothes!”

“Don’t mess with me! Why would I volunteer after seeing something this suspicious?”

A sticky liquid that suddenly started to foam did not seem that suspicious to me... Well, maybe a little. Either way, it was nothing that should have scared a grown man. *Let’s keep going.*

“How pathetic for a grown man. There is nothing to be scared of. I am holding it in my bare hands.”

“Are you calling me pathetic?!”

“A small child is telling you that there is no issue with it and yet you are still afraid. That would seem pathetic to anyone.”

“You little brat! I’ll show you!”

Belgo’s face turned red and he threw off his clothes at once. *That’s the spirit.*

Luckily, Lady Maika and Lord Arthur had not come along. Mrs. Rihn and Lord Itsuki had prevented them from coming, considering it was a meeting with prisoners.

“Bring it on!”

“Please show me your back!”

He was striking a daunting pose, but I did not intend to wash his front. Hearing my request, he turned over, showing me his back.

“Let me know if it hurts.”

“It’s going to hurt?!”

It did not seem like he understood my joke. His back curled up.

“Just for caution’s sake. It is the first time I am using it on someone other than myself. But Arthur and Maika have also touched the soap, so contact alone should not result in any problem.”

“O-Okay. Hey, be a little bit more careful! ...For caution’s sake.”

Since I could not be bothered, I started rubbing his back with all my might.

“Hey!!” he yelled.

“Did you say something?” I enjoyed seeing the tough Belgo react like this. It made me want to tease him some more.

“I said you should be more careful after giving me a warning! Don’t scrub so hard! Are you sure this is safe?”

“All is fine! ...Probably.” I laughed while continuing to scrub his back. The liquid soap seemed to work quite well as the dirt on his back came falling off easily. “Hm. I see, I see.”

“Hey, what’s going on?”

“Everyone, come have a look! Is this not amazing?” Ignoring Belgo, I asked the other prisoners for their opinion. It was fun to see Belgo squirm more and more as they all expressed their amazement.

However, I did not want to tease him too much, so I handed him the cloth so he could see for himself by washing the front.

“Wait, is this dirt coming off? That’s unbelievable.”

“Yes, there was a lot of dirt piled up. By the way, you can also wash your scalp, although your hair might end up becoming a bit damaged, like stiff or dry.”

I remembered that in my past life there had also been different soap specifically for hair, most likely made up of a different formula. That was another item on my list.

“It will just damage the hair? I don’t mind that. I don’t want my head to stay dirty when my body is this clean.”

“In the three days that I have tested it there have been no issues so far, so use it as you like.”

“You don’t have to tell me twice.”

Seeing how their leader gradually lost his hesitation washing his body, the other prisoners started taking off their clothes too. It took less than a minute for me to be surrounded by naked prisoners covered in foam.

“Wow, this feels great!”

“I can’t believe it! Even the smell’s gone!”

“This is the first time I’ve felt this refreshed since coming here!”

It appeared to be a success.

“I am going to repeat myself, but your skin may turn red or start itching. In that case, please let me know.” *Also, make sure you don’t catch a cold while being naked outside.* “You can also use this soap to wash your clothes, not just your body.” As soon as I mentioned that, everyone covered in bubbles stopped moving.

“Are you serious? That’s amazing!”

“We can use it on our clothes too?”

“I can’t wait to enjoy my next meal completely clean.”

“Does that mean I can finally get rid of the strong smell of my clothes?”

They must have gone through a lot of hardships until now. Ending up here as prisoners, their lives must not have been easy.

Belgo emerged from the frolicking bunch. He looked me straight in the eyes with a serious expression on his face. It was as if he was searching my soul for any dirt.

“Little brat, what’s your plan doing all this?”

“My plan? Well, I guess I want to promote good hygiene.”

“Is that going to help you?”

“Is it going to help me? It is a prerequisite; the absolute minimum requirement. If the sanitary conditions are bad, infectious diseases and epidemics break out easily.”

I imagined that was one of the reasons why they had been made to live outside the city wall. It appeared that there was a high death rate among these prisoners.

“No one’s ever cared about that,” Belgo protested.

“That is the problem. None of you are condemned to death, so we have to make sure you are healthy and cultured while you are serving your sentence.”

We are going to work together starting today.

As such, I could not have them live worse than beasts, surrounded by bad odor day and night. Since I did not want to keep constantly dealing with the composting process myself, I needed to teach them the basics. If possible, I even wanted them to learn how to read and write, so they could help me keep records and write reports. It was only an idea for now, but it seemed important. I decided to work towards setting up a study group for them.

As I was adding a new step to my plan in my head, Belgo exchanged glances with his prisoner friends. “I think I know what you want. We just need to knead the shit that you bring us.”

“Yes! I realize it is not an easy task, but it is important. I would greatly appreciate your help.”

“I don’t see how it’s important, but I’ll do the job.”

It was the first time that I saw his nihilistic but charming smile. Maybe I would have been a bit more impressed if he had not been naked and covered in bubbles. *Please put on some clothes, or you’re going to end up catching a cold!*

Over the past two months, Belgo and the other prisoners had been hard at work. Inside a shed that was built near a farm for the purpose of composting, part of the animal manure had fermented enough that it could be used as fertilizer. If I used it in the kitchen garden, it should make it in time for the summer harvest. I planned on giving the prisoners the yield as a reward. I also helped as much as I could, but the work required for composting was really tough.

The feces and the materials needed for composting, such as straw, borrowed the strength of microbes to create the nutrients necessary to act as fertilizer. As always, I lacked fundamental knowledge to fully comprehend the process, but part of the microbes broke down the ammonia, turning it into nitrogen, which acted as a nutrient for the plants. In order for those microbes to properly execute their functions, the compost had to be stirred. The inside of the compost had to be filled with air, while at the same time maintaining a consistent temperature, not too hot and not too cold.

This delicate work was carried out inside a stinky shed filled with heat and humidity generated by the compost pile. On top of that, parasites regularly came by to say hi from inside the raw materials. It brought me to tears. While I was mentally an adult, I still could not help but cry. I was glad Belgo and the others helped me. On every occasion I thanked them for their work with all my heart.

I motivated myself to set foot inside the kitchen garden for the sake of Belgo and the others who had been doing their best, and above anything else, for myself. I tightly grasped a jar filled with compost. It no longer smelled bad. It made sense, since the microbes had transformed the ammonia, the source of the smell, into nitrogen. Realizing this, I was impressed by how well it had turned out. Also, it did no longer feel sticky like the excreta. Instead, it felt soft and smooth, like good quality soil. I was reminded of the time I planted potatoes in elementary school in my past life. The fertilizer back then felt the same.

“It took a long time to get this far.”

Closing my eyes, I relived the memories of standing in the field in the village for the first time. I could still vividly recall my blank amazement when I learned that I had to cultivate the field with low-quality tools and without any help from either humans or domestic animals. When I saw my first harvest, I felt hopeless, like all my hard work had been washed away by the rain. At that moment, I blankly stared at my hands, which had become rough and injured from all the field work.

Some time later, after Mrs. Yuika had read me the story that changed everything, I roused myself and headed back to the field in an attempt to try something new, but I did not know what to do. I felt powerless. I was shivering from head to toes, as if someone had poured a bucket of freezing cold water over me. Back then, I still lacked the knowledge to do anything.

On top of all those painful memories, now my thoughts headed back to the more recent memory of the composting process. Anyway, I had made it all the way here. Finally, all of my efforts had come to this.

Next to me, Lady Maika touched and checked the inside of the jar with great

interest. “It really is like good quality soil! Just like it said in our references. It’s astonishing if you know what it’s made of!” Her words sounded lively. She was quite strong-minded, touching the compost while knowing the process.

“Yes, in this condition it is more than suitable to use as a fertilizer. All that is left now is to use it and keep track of the progress.”

Lady Maika was the only person helping me with the field work. Lady Reina, who was going to bear the future of the city, and Lord Arthur, who presumably had similar responsibilities, were advised not to participate in the practical work, since fertilizer produced from animal manure was still considered taboo. In fact, Lady Maika had also been told to refrain, but she did not seem to care.

“Let us get started then, Maika!”

“Yeah! Leave it to me! I’ve read our plan several times.”

She was very quick on the uptake. It prompted me to express my honest gratitude towards my childhood friend. “Thank you for always helping me, Maika.”

“Hehe, you’re welcome,” she replied with a smile on her flushed face while fumbling with her hair.

She was a cheerful and open-hearted girl, but it seemed like she was embarrassed by my direct words of gratitude. Similarly, I felt a little embarrassed by my frank statement.

“But I’ve not been doing that much! I should be the one thanking you!” she added.

Usually, I would have replied saying something like, “I am glad that is how you feel,” but this time around I just smiled. Somehow, I felt that was the most appropriate response. It appeared that our bond had truly deepened. It was more of a reflex than anything. It felt like this different approach was better suited to the situation. Nothing really happened afterwards.

Lady Maika looked at me in surprise before smiling like always. “Let’s get started,” she happily said.

“Yes, let us start.”

Now, I would have loved to just dump this compost which was the product of a lot of hard work on the ground, but unfortunately, that was not how it worked. Since fertilizer contained a condensation of nutrients non-existent in the natural soil, the crops were at risk of being damaged if you did not moderate the amount. The books referred to it as “fertilizer burn” which was a perfectly fitting name in my opinion.

“Is this enough?” Lady Maika confirmed with me after digging a hole the circumference of her wrist.

“Yes, it should be. Although I am not quite sure myself until we test it.”

There were many things that only became clear after trying them out yourself no matter how many sources you consulted. One of the reasons for this was the minute divergences between the different uses of compost. It all depended on the environment of the soil, the nutrients in the compost itself, the type of crops, the type of fertilization, as well as the current season and weather. Since the space on the pages was limited, not everything was written down, and above anything else, we were not able to measure many of the relevant phenomena. I had no idea how to investigate the composition of the soil and compost. I probably could have determined whether it was acidic or alkaline, but that was about it.

Lady Maika, who had shared my worries when we worked on the plan, agreed with a bitter smile. “Making the compost was a lot of work, but this part won’t be easy either.”

“Exactly. It is a lot harder than expected to engage with nature.”

Apparently, in the early period of the ancient civilization they had been capable of analyzing the composition of the soil. It showed how magnificent they were, similar to the ancestors from my past life. I wondered how many people had contributed to the book that we consulted. It could not have been just one or two writers and editors. In the long course of history, there must have been a series of nameless, faceless people whose success and failures made up this book. Imagining that I was at the end of that line, even something as simple as farming was fun. Regrettably, our working area was limited because it was a kitchen garden, though. Considering that I used to want to run

away from field work in the past, I felt like I had matured quite a bit.

Next to me, Lady Maika looked at me. She seemed to be enjoying herself too, probably reminiscing fondly about the farm work back at the village.

We both continued working with a smile on our faces until a group of five students our age approached us from a distance. The atmosphere suddenly felt stuffy, just like it did back at the compost shed. The group was whispering and letting out nasty laughs while blatantly looking in our direction. They mocked us as “poor hicks,” said we were a “good match for the animal poo,” and talked about us “sullyng the reputation of the academy.” Even though they lowered their voices, I heard everything they were saying. *What a bunch of troubling kids. Look, Lady Maika’s mood has taken a sudden turn for the worse because of you!* I myself did not get mad at their childish jests considering I was already an adult on the inside. I was so mature that I felt at peace by simply devising a plan for revenge.

The group of five was centered around Moldo, who was the son of an influential person in this city. This was just a personal impression, but he seemed like the stereotypical child who had grown up without any hardships and pouted whenever he was not number one. Considering that he was not among the top of the class this term in either literary or military arts, he must have been fuming. After all, our agriculture improvement plan had catapulted us to the top for the literary arts, and Lady Maika was fighting for the top spot of the military arts with a strong boy called Glen. That fact must have hurt his childish pride immensely, leading him to this counterproductive action. It would have been more productive if he read a book or practiced his sword swinging skills, rather than increasing his slander skills.

Another reason for his actions was surely Lady Maika’s popularity. On top of having perfect manners, Mrs. Yuika’s beloved daughter was friendly and sociable, making her just as well-liked in the city as she had been in the village. Lady Reina was also just as popular. While she was strictly adhering to the rules, she was caring and trustworthy, like an older sister. This seemed to appeal to a lot of people. Moldo was no exception. He seemed to like both of them, but his methods of approach were beyond clumsy; they were just plain wrong. I did not think that reasoning with a boy going through puberty would have produced

any results. He was of the age where he wanted to tease the girls he liked.

On the other hand, Glen, who also seemed to be attracted to Lady Maika, directly approached her via martial arts training, trying to impress her with his physical prowess, so there was no bright future ahead for Moldo in comparison. Especially since Lady Maika also had a good impression of Glen. Although she apparently considered him more of a strong rival rather than a love interest...

Consequently, my anger and exasperation towards Moldo and his crew were easily converted to pity. *Although, I'll admit that my anger gauge is still filling up as they keep gossiping right behind my back.*

While I was hoping they would soon just give up and go away, Lady Maika suddenly showed her anger. It looked like she had reached her limit before me. "Ash, I think we need to do something about them."

"Do we? I think we should just ignore them for now."

"But they are making fun of you!"

Lady Maika looked cute as she was in a huff with her puffed cheeks. It reminded me of our encounter with Jigil back at the village. I wondered how his hunter apprenticeship was going.

While I was caught up in nostalgia, Lady Maika let out an angry sigh. "Ash, you're really something else. You're not even angry at them."

I was angry, but I did not feel like they were worth my time, so I just swallowed my anger.

"To be honest, I have not even been listening to what they are saying."

"Really? Have you been ignoring them?"

"Yes. I have nothing to gain from listening to them."

As long as you were human, slander always somehow found its way to your ears, so I could not completely ignore it, but I dealt with it by treating it as "the noise of a small gnat." It was bothering me, but since I was dealing with an insect, there was no point in reacting.

"That's pretty harsh..." Lady Maika remarked.

“Is it?”

“I feel like it’s worse than shouting back in anger.”

Isn’t it more peaceful than reacting, though? “If they wanted to talk things through, then it would probably be better to face them even though they are badmouthing me. But if they are just letting off steam there is no point in taking them seriously.”

“Do you think they are just letting off steam?” She looked at the five students, who were still at it. “You may be right. I don’t think anything we could say would stop them.”

“Judging from what they are saying, it seems that they do not like us very much. And people’s dislikes do not change that easily. Besides, I have no interest in hearing anyone’s one-sided preferences if it does not further the conversation. Especially if they are not positive. Of course, that does not apply to hearing the preferences of someone you like.”

“You’re right! I’d want to know those too! I like your Hamburg steak!”

“I will make you one soon!”

Seeing her nod excitedly made me realize that she was still a child at heart.

“Either way, it is not like it is harmless, but pointless—there is really no point to it. We would just end up wasting their time too. Just treat them like they are an annoying gnat.”

I was very busy, so I could not really spare any time. If they just wanted to complain, I was sure the majestic rock over there was more than willing to listen to them.

“I see. I think I now understand why you can rush along without paying attention to your surroundings.”

“What? I feel like, other than slander, I pay a lot of attention to my surroundings...”

She just ignored my response. It probably sounded like an annoying gnat to her.

“But while you may be fine with it, I still think they’re causing trouble.” She

sent a deadly stare in their direction.

“Well, you are right, but...” I felt that it was going to be more bothersome to engage with them than simply leave it be.

“Yeah, I understand that you don’t want to waste your time on them.” She reassured me with a nod. “Don’t worry. I’ll take care of it.”

Seeing her lively, determined expression, I felt a slight chill run down my spine.



The night after hearing Lady Maika's declaration of war, I asked my roommate for advice.

"So could you please help Maika if she gets herself into any trouble?"

"Yeah, she can sometimes become very determined..."

Lord Arthur showed a wry smile while raising their eyebrows and putting a hand on their chin. It was an expression of both resignation and affection.

"Leave it to me. I don't like that kind of malicious gossip either, so I'll help where I can. I'll try making up for not being able to help with the compost."

"Thank you. I feel relieved hearing you will help."

"Now I feel really responsible hearing you say that. I need to brace myself." They stared at me with a smile, as if they enjoyed that responsibility.

It should be said that we had this conversation sitting next to each other on the bottom bunk bed. That was nothing unnatural for roommates, but it could have been considered a risky situation in this case, since she was a girl of high social status and I a heterosexual boy. I felt like I deserve some applause for my virtuous behavior so far.

As I was waiting for my applause from all over the world, Lord Arthur suddenly adopted a serious expression. "But it's unfortunate that our serious project is being ridiculed. I can see why Maika would get upset."

"Well, considering what we are doing, I can also understand why you would want to keep your distance not knowing any details."

Especially to someone from a good upbringing, it must have seemed unbearable to see us handle something so unclean.

"Maybe, but you've made sure that proper sanitary measures are taken. It seems rude to denounce it as dirty without knowing anything." It was unusual to see the aristocratic, calm Lord Arthur criticize someone else with such a strict expression. "Since I'm living with you, I can say with confidence that I know no one who is taking as much care of their appearance as you are. You may lack a certain noble style and high-class accessories, but you have impeccable cleanliness, and above anything else, perfect manners. I like you much more

than Moldo.”

I was overjoyed hearing that from someone elegantly wearing high-class accessories themselves. I was getting closer to my objective of becoming a perfect gentleman.

“Thank you. It gives me confidence to hear you say that you like me.”

“I mean as friends, of course! I like you as a friend!”

“Yes, thank you.”

Lord Arthur was a girl after all. As such, she was in a difficult position, where she had to be careful when using the word “like.” Men were simple creatures prone to misunderstanding and getting excited too soon, after all. *I’ll make sure to take care too.*

“However, I have to apologize to you,” I said.

“Why? Did you do something wrong? What did you do, Ash?”

Holding their chin, Lord Arthur inclined their head to the side. Underneath their bangs, their eyes were blinking in confusion.

“Networking is one of the purposes of this academy. I imagine that is not going great for you, since I got you involved in my plan and everyone else is avoiding you now. I am sorry for selfishly causing you trouble.”

“What are you talking about?” Lord Arthur looked genuinely puzzled. I did not know what to say in response to this unexpected reaction. “Ash, you’re a genius, but sometimes you’re just human.”

Wait, I’ve always been a human.

Including my past-life memories, I did not recall any time where I stopped being one. Although, admittedly, it would have been hard to deny if someone had called me “undead.”

While I looked like I had received a pie to my face in jest, Lord Arthur smiled gently. “My networking has been a success so far. I’ve become friends with Reina, who excels at all civil service-related things, and Maika, who is accomplished in both literary and military arts. I’ve also had my eyes on Glen, who is a pure fighter type. He’s also been approaching me more often lately.”

Ah, it made sense that Glen, who was attracted to Lady Maika, would also often interact with Lord Arthur, one of her close friends.

“You see, I’ve been getting involved with all the people who are top of the class,” Lord Arthur concluded.

“Now that you mention it...”

“And above all, with you, Ash.”

Me? The problem child sticking out like a sore thumb?

“Not just in relation to the academy itself—you are the most interesting person I’ve ever met. You’re intelligent, you get things done, and while you’re very carefully researching things, you don’t mind getting your hands dirty experimenting with compost. All your actions are very reckless.”

I see. I’ve been put in the “oddball” category. Can’t deny that.

“But even though you’re reckless, I have a lot of fun around you. You keep showing me new things and moving me. The capital was much more diverse than this place, but I never enjoyed myself this much. I didn’t realize the world could be such a fun place until I met you.”

It seemed that *she* had talked herself into excitement, as redness was shining through her cheeks. Her calm, aristocratic attitude had given way to the face of a young girl brimming with curiosity.

I’m glad you’re enjoying the sensory scientific experiment attraction presented by Ash, the guy with past-life memories.

“Besides, if it wasn’t for you, people would have only approached me because I’m related to the count. I realize that that’s inevitable for someone like me, but...” Her excited face, which had shone like the sun illuminating a sapling, was suddenly shrouded in dark clouds. “But if I’m going to be used, I don’t want it to be because of my lineage or social standing. I wanted them to look at me as who I am. Even if it was just for a little bit...”

I kept my mouth shut listening to her soliloquy. I did not carelessly acknowledge her past tense narration with any interjections. She had likely just told me something that was supposed to stay secret.

“That’s why I was so happy when I met you. You were excited when you heard that I could read and write and calculate. You wanted me to help because of my skills.”

“Since there was such a brilliant person in front of me in my time of need, I had to ask for your help with all my might.”

“Yeah, all your might. Haha, it felt indeed a bit overwhelming.”

Because I had locked on to you as a target for my workforce. And Lady Maika had rebuked me.

“You are good at using people. Saying ‘using’ might sound bad, but... I remember an instance where I felt extremely uneasy in the past when someone asked for my help. But with you, I want to help out of my own will.”

It was hard to look directly at her smile, which concealed the countless open wounds from which she was suffering. Who on earth would hurt such a young, delicate girl? And not just any girl—she was an extraordinarily brilliant girl. If you hurt her, you hurt the world. Or to be precise, you hurt me whom she was presently helping. It was inconvenient for me if she thought that the concept of “using someone” or “being used” was a burden. In this case, I had to prove to her that neither were bad. She needed to look at it from a different angle.

“I do not think you are hurting because you were used.”

“I don’t know... Since it’s you, I’m going to ask: Why do you think that?”

“No one gets hurt simply from being used. You are hurting because someone hurt you.”

Of course, in this case the word “using” meant to rely on someone. It was rigorously distinct from situations where it referred to someone using a person with the intention of harming them from the start.

“I do not know what you went through in the past, but please do not confuse people who approach you with ill will and those who just want your help.” *Like me.* “It can be difficult to make the distinction. You have to be careful. However, since you are an influential person, there will always be a lot of people asking for your help. You do not have to answer all of them. Just make sure to help those who truly are in need. I know you can do it.” *I am begging you. I still need*

your help, so please keep being someone who's easy to use.

“Yeah, there may be people who just want my help among those who are trying to use me.”

“There definitely are. I am one of them.”

As I proclaimed with a serious look on my face, it seemed that her restraints had come off and she burst into laughter. “If you say so yourself, there’s no doubt about it.”

I promise you with all my heart, sincere intentions and ulterior motives included.

Chapter 4: Paper Is Mightier Than the Spear

Spring quickly gave way to summer. So far, it did not seem like there were any issues with the compost made from animal feces. *I'll admit that sounded a bit passive, or even negative. Let's try this again. Hooray, I did it!*

The tomatoes in the kitchen garden had a healthy appearance and were so large that it almost seemed as if they were going to burst at any moment. They looked much healthier than the ones that were growing semi-wildly in the village. Their shapes were uneven, but considering the current level of agricultural development, the aesthetic beauty of the vegetables was not a matter of concern. For now, the volume was more important than the appearance. Without delay, I picked the ripe red fruit and cooled them down in well water.

After hearing what was going on, Mrs. Rihn arrived at the scene. When she saw the tomatoes floating in cool water inside a wooden bucket, her composed expression turned into a broad smile. "Those are some beautiful tomatoes. I haven't seen fruits this big in a long while."

"I am glad to hear that. If this is thanks to the influence of the compost, then it is indeed a big success. But it is too early to draw any conclusions."

I had also planted some tomatoes in a different spot without fertilizer, which had grown smaller and looked less healthy. However, it was too early to speak of success with only two batches and such a small harvest.

"For now, confirming that there was no bad influence will be good enough."

"I'm sure it will be alright as long as you stick to your plan." Unlike the first time I met her, Mrs. Rihn showed her faith in me. "I just wish you approached all your activities with that same careful attitude." Or maybe she did not have so much faith in me after all. I wondered which one it was.

As I contemplated the difficulty of human relationships, we—all the project members excluding Mother Yae—finished writing down the sizes of the

tomatoes. As expected, the fertilized batch was larger in size and quantity. While it was not enough for a conclusive judgment, it felt good to collect valuable data on the first try.

I smiled as I took one of the cool tomatoes in my hand. "I cannot wait to try it. I imagine you might not necessarily want to eat the ones that used compost, so please feel free to eat the other batch," I said to the others.

There was nothing better than biting into a fresh tomato in the heat of summer. I could not resist anymore, so I went ahead and took a big bite. *Everyone, dig in! Wait, why do you all look so shocked?*

Mrs. Rihn, Lord Arthur, and Lady Reina looked at me in disbelief. It had been a while since I had seen that expression on their faces. Lady Maika, on the other hand, was ready to bite into one of the tomatoes grown with fertilizer, but stopped just short of it as she noticed their reactions. I wondered what exactly had happened.

Lord Arthur cautiously pointed at the tomato in my hand and said, "Aren't tomatoes poisonous?"

No way. It was a serious question. Lady Reina nodded along in agreement. Mrs. Rihn shook her head in an effort to stop me. *What's happening?*

"What do you mean? We've been eating them every summer back at the village. We've never had any trouble." Lady Maika was the only one backing me up.

The other three, still firm in their belief, turned pale upon hearing her statement.

Lord Arthur seemed especially startled, shouting in a voice which was more high-pitched than usual. "Don't eat that! You two will end up getting sick in the head and die!"

It felt like there was some strange superstition at work again.

Lady Maika and I both looked at each other before stuffing our cheeks.

"What are you doing?!" Lord Arthur yelled.

It tasted a bit sour, but it actually felt pleasant and refreshing. The ample fruit

juice quenched my thirst and revitalized my exhausted body after the straining harvest work. I was now determined to start a calm discussion with the three poison believers.

“Ash!! You’re always reckless, but this time you’ve outdone yourself!”

“He’s right! Your body is not yours alone!”

“Lady Maika! Lord Itsuki has repeatedly asked you to take care of yourself!”

Everyone besides me and Lady Maika had lost their cool. I decided to let them vent for a while. Although, admittedly, it made me feel a bit guilty to see them get teary-eyed.

After the three of them were done expressing their worries, I began to question them as calmly as possible. “So, why do you think tomatoes are poisonous?”

“There you go again, playing cool... Do you realize how worried we are?” Lord Arthur pouted after grumbling about my behavior.

Considering that even Lady Maika now nodded along enthusiastically with them, it appeared that my calmness had quite a bad reputation.

“I just wanted to further a detailed discussion based on those worries.” As I uncharacteristically voiced my true intentions, everyone else let out a big sigh.

Human nature was a strange thing indeed. It was such a mystery that I did not know how to react, so I just decided to press for an answer. *If you’ve got something to say, Arthur, just let it out.*

“I guess I’ll explain... A long time ago, there was a prince who loved tomatoes,” Lord Arthur began.

“You cannot blame him for that—tomatoes are delicious,” I remarked.

Even a royal family member could not resist the temptation that was the taste of tomatoes.

Unusually, Lord Arthur gave me a sharp look. “Ash... That prince ate too many tomatoes and ended up going insane. Alongside all of his closest followers.”

“In what way?” I asked.

“According to the stories, he had memory loss, and started hallucinating and suddenly crying or laughing out of nowhere. To put it simply, his mind was not well.”

I had my doubts as I listened to Lord Arthur tell this story with an uneasy look on their face. That sounded more like he had taken suspicious drugs than eaten tomatoes.

“The prince was brilliant and had a bright future ahead of him. Accordingly, all his followers were equally brilliant people, but they all started suffering from the same disease. Their minds deteriorated alongside that of the prince, resulting in a tremendous loss for society,” Lord Arthur finished the story.

All that talk of hallucinations reminded me of narcotics. Cannabis and magic mushrooms were easy-to-use drugs, and mood fluctuation was often associated with highs and lows from drug usage.

“Ash, you’re a genius. And I like you as a person too... I mean as a friend, of course! You’re a dear friend!”

I wondered if there were any drugs in this world. There must have been. I had come across a plant that looked just like wolfsbane, so they should not have been too different from my past life either. Actually, it might have even been bad if there were no drugs at all. Some of them could be used as anesthetics in medical treatments. Those would become indispensable if I wanted to introduce surgical procedures at some point in the future. According to my past-life memories, a plant called “devil’s trumpet” could be used as an ingredient for anesthetics. It was highly poisonous, but it was part of the nightshade family of flowering plants, just like eggplants, which were a delicious treat in summer.

“You shouldn’t eat anything as dangerous as tomatoes! They’re just for viewing!”

Right, nightshades. I reflexively nodded several times at my own realization.

“I’m glad you understand, Ash,” Lord Arthur misinterpreted.

Tomatoes were nightshades too. I had said they were not poisonous, but that was not entirely true. The three poison believers had been right. Sort of.

A ripe tomato did not contain enough poison to harm a human body. I did not remember the exact numbers, but you had to eat more than 100 or 200 kilos before it reached a lethal dose. It was ridiculous. Your stomach was bound to explode before you could die from tomato poisoning. However, unripe fruits and stalks or petals contained higher doses of poison. Was it possible that the Tomato Prince's love for the fruit had led him to eating those parts? *I can't imagine the stalks and petals being very tasty, though.*

"So, essentially, if I want the consumption of tomatoes to become accepted again, I first need to find out what exactly the prince was eating. Maybe I can find some of his recipes." That was a case for Mother Yae, the only member of our project group who was currently not here. "I guess I should head right to the temple and ask Mother Yae about any records relating to that prince..."

As I informed my collaborators about the conclusion that I had drawn for myself, Mrs. Rihn and Lady Reina both put their left hand on their foreheads. Like mother, like daughter. But why did they look so exasperated? Also, why did Lord Arthur look so angry? *I guess this calls for an apology.*

"Uhm... I am not sure why, but it looks like I have made a blunder, so I am sorry."

"Don't apologize if you don't know what you did wrong!"

My apology did not seem to have the desired effect, since Lord Arthur was still angry.

"Please calm down. I will listen to anything you say."

As I tried to diffuse the situation, a teary-eyed Lord Arthur tried asking Lady Maika for help. "Maika, please say something too!"

Their cry of desperation was answered by a soft, silk-like laughter. "Hehe, do you really think I didn't say anything to him?"

"Ah, sorry... Please don't make that face... I'm going to try my best to keep up with you."

Thanks to Lady Maika, Lord Arthur finally calmed down. I felt relieved. *By the way, I still don't know what expression Lady Maika made that day, I couldn't see her face from where I was.*

It was not like I was scared of knowing Lady Maika's expression or facing everyone's judgmental stares, but I had hurried to the temple as fast as I could.

Mother Yae, who seemed to become prettier by the day, smiled after hearing my inquiry. "Yes, there are records of the recipes of the prince who died from eating tomatoes. There are copies here at the library too."

Today was my lucky day! I wondered if there was a guardian angel watching over me. Or to put it in terms of this world, I must have benefited from the divine protection of the monkey god.

"That is wonderful! But I wonder why they are still preserved even though tomatoes are considered to be poisonous food."

"It must be because the prince really loved tomatoes. He kept notes of all the tomato dishes he ate in his journal, and generally speaking, all journals from royalty or nobles are preserved."

"I see, so it is not so much a cooking book but his personal diary." That made sense. "Although, it is still a bit strange that copies are kept at the library of a provincial city temple." I tilted my head as I asked Mother Yae for an explanation.

"That is probably because tomatoes are cultivated in an extremely wide area. In summer, you can see them all over the gardens of Sacula."

"Ah, right. In the dormitory there were some planted for viewing only. So, in other words, the copies were distributed all over the country as a cautionary measure to prevent accidental ingestion."

"That is how I see it too. Back when those copies first made the rounds, tomatoes were still widely cultivated as food."

It was not an overstatement to say that the long-time waste of such a nutrient-rich food constituted a mutiny against civilization. That was unforgivable, dear Tomato Prince. As a punishment, you will be known to posterity as the person who deprived humanity for centuries of your own favorite food.

"Let me get to work and see what the issue with that prince was then."

“This is the copy of his journal.”

Mother Yae, who had become used to my research methods, presented me with the book in question. It was yet another old transcript. While it was at the very least 50 years old, it was still among the newer documents of this world. I started reading it at once.

“He really loved tomatoes...”

All the entries from spring, when the seeds were planted, until summer, when the fruits were harvested, were about tomatoes. They were in stark contrast to the entries from fall and winter, which detailed in a serious tone the government affairs of the prince’s territories. His existence was a joke in itself. *As a thank you for making me laugh, I’ll make sure you go down as a funny story in the annals of food and agricultural history.*

Someone who had loved tomatoes this much surely would have wanted them to be reintroduced as a food. And no doubt he would have loved to be immortalized alongside his favorite food. But even if I was wrong, I would not be able to hear a dead person’s objection.

“I found it. From here on, the entries start looking questionable.”

Around the same time that stranger recipes started showing up, the writings also gradually became more confusing. There were several footnotes stating that the original text was not legible anymore. Outside tomato season, the writing seemed to normalize a bit, but the entries no longer resembled those of a brilliant statesman.

“Judging from the abnormalities in the recipes of this journal, it does not seem like the consumption of tomatoes was the reason for his mental decline.”

“As usual, your opinion is quite provocative. Would you mind giving me some time before you continue?” Mother Yae stopped short of saying it was bad for her heart as she took a few deep breaths.

After a few seconds, she made a fist to steel her resolve. It was baffling to see her go through all that just to listen to my calm and logical explanation.

“I’m ready, Ash. What do you think was the reason?”

“Most likely the stalks and petals of the tomato plant. He was so enamored with tomatoes that he made his chef use parts that are usually thrown out.”

According to the journal, the prince had ordered his cooks to constantly come up with new recipes involving tomatoes. It was not clear how much he pressured them, but considering he had been keeping records and evaluated his daily menus, it must have been substantial. As a result, the chef was pushed to use not just the fruit, but also other parts of the plant, like the stalk and petals. Technically, it was all part of the tomato plant, so it would qualify as a tomato dish. However, I was not sure if I wanted to call something that poisoned you a proper meal.

“The entries only start becoming disordered once the chef started using parts other than the fruit of the tomato. Until that point, it does not seem like there were any problems, so it would be unlikely for the fruit itself to be the culprit.”

“I see. If the fruit itself had been poisonous, there should have been problems much earlier.”

“Besides, back then, tomatoes were widely eaten. Is that correct?”

“Yes, you are right. In that regard, your reasoning seems to hold up. However, is it really possible for only part of a plant to be poisonous? I’m no expert, but it seems strange...”

“Ah, yes, that does indeed sound strange if you are not aware of plant biology.”

However, it was not unusual for plants to have different concentrations of poison in different parts. There were a lot of cases where the plant lost its poison once it fully matured too.

“Fundamentally, plants are not able to defend themselves against enemies or run away. Therefore, in order to survive and not get eaten, they produce poison.”

It was a natural poison produced by the plant itself that acted as a pesticide against harmful insects and animals. The food chain was relentless, but no life form existed solely for the purpose of sustaining others. Everyone was fighting for their own survival on equal terms.

“At the same time, plants realize the advantage of sowing their seed in an area as wide as possible. If they only reproduced in the same narrow area, one single fire could lead to the destruction of their species.”

“So, since plants can’t move, they use other animals to transport their seeds?”

“Precisely. There are parts of a plant which it does not want anyone to eat, but conversely, there are also parts that it requires to be eaten. The former are filled with bitter poison, whereas the latter are sweet and nutritious. For example, you can often see birds pecking at the fruit of tomato plants.”

“I see!” Mother Yae sounded excited as she realized the workings of the natural world. “That makes a lot of sense! In that case, a ripe tomato, which carries the seeds for the next generation inside its red flesh, would not contain any poison. That part of the plant exists to be eaten by other animals.”

“Exactly! However, this does not mean that all ripe fruits are edible. They are fit for animal consumption, but that does not necessarily mean that humans could tolerate it too.”

“That’s good to know. But in this case, there is a history of people eating tomatoes. And it is safe to assume that they are the same type as the ones which are currently being cultivated.” Mother Yae frantically nodded. “It appears very credible. The red part of the tomato plant, the fruit, doesn’t contain any poison.”

“I am glad to hear you agree. In fact, I have been eating them for years at the village, and I ate one just earlier. I will write up a report after a few more experiments.”

“Leave the rest to me. I’ll take responsibility and give the approval of the temple.”

The approval of a temple, which acted as an academic institution in this world, had a lot of weight among the intelligentsia. If the temple had not appraised our agricultural improvement plan as “logical and proven via credible sources,” Lord Itsuki would have been much more hesitant to give his approval. Mother Yae was well aware of this, and she generously appraised my proposals. I was very grateful, especially considering that Master Folke had never told us

about this system.

“Thank you very much. If this goes over well, you will be able to use tomatoes to make a delicious meat dish using one of these recipes,” I suggested.

And I knew exactly what she was going to do with said dish. As his adjutant apprentice, I was aware of Sir George’s latest meal plans and who provided them.

“That would be lovely. Apparently, he loves meat too.” Mother Yae almost sounded like a new wife when she passionately referred to “him.”

Sir George was still indecisive as ever, but thanks to Mother Yae’s resolute attack plan, all the obstacles in their way were steadily being removed.

She was in good spirits, since she had received new ammunition with those new recipes, and promptly scanned through the Tomato Prince’s journal. “I think I can summarize the relationship between the poisonous parts of the tomato plant and the mental decline of the prince myself. I’ll write up a rough draft and have Arthur and Reina tidy it up for me.”

“If you do not mind, I will gladly take you up on your offer.”

After all, kindness was best repaid with kindness. A collaboration desired by both sides produced the best results. Both Mother Yae and I nodded at each other with a beaming smile on our faces.

In order to collect data proving that tomatoes were not poisonous, I visited the shack outside the city wall. Since the prisoners were already experienced test subjects, I was going to ask them for their help again.

“Please, eat up these tomatoes!”

The prisoners looked at each other questioning after seeing the basket filled with tomatoes. It felt surreal to see these tough guys being afraid of a red fruit.

Belgo was pushed out of the crowd as the representative in front of the basket. “I mean... I don’t think you would feed us poison at this point... but are you sure this is alright?”

“I only came because I concluded it was alright. I have been eating them every

year back at the village. They are delicious!”

I held out a round tomato in front of him. *Just take it and eat it already. Any resistance is futile. And I won't let you leave until you've eaten, so don't waste your precious time.* Although I realized it took some courage to eat something which was considered to be poisonous.

Belgo took a step backwards, but was immediately pushed back again by his comrades. “Hey, don't push me!”

“It's 'cos you walked back! I know how you feel, but aren't you the boss?”

“He's right! You always want to be the leader, so you should take one for the team! I know how you feel though...”

“C'mon, Belgo! He ain't done any harm so far! I know he looks scary, but still!”

It seemed like they were more afraid of me than the tomatoes. How strange considering I was only an 11-year-old boy. But that was an issue for another day. For now, I needed to focus on shoving this tomato into Belgo's mouth. Thankfully, the other prisoners helped me by holding him down. To an outsider it might have looked like Belgo was about to be sacrificed to the Devil.

“Open your mouth and get ready to chew!”

“Wait! I'll eat it myself!”

“If you are going to eat it anyway, it does not really matter. Eat up!”

I stuffed the tomato in his mouth the moment he was about to shout something else. Since I was dealing with a middle-aged man, of course I did not say, “Here comes the airplane!” Observing Belgo moan for a while, I realized that it may have been a bit too big to make him eat it all at once.

After he finally swallowed it, he only gave a very brief comment. “That was a terrible experience!”

Good grief! How inconsiderate of him to not tell us how he liked it!

I turned towards the others with a smile. “You see, everything is fine!”

I ignored the fact that most poisons did not produce any symptoms this soon after ingesting them. Several of the prisoners seemed to want to say something,

but none of them did, so I assumed it was nothing important. Any unvoiced opinions were not valid anyway.

“Everyone, please try it. It is delicious.”

“He’s right! Eat up!” Belgo backed me up in a commanding voice. This was probably the closest I could get to him admitting that he liked it.

He took tomatoes in both his hands and shoved them in his comrades’ mouths. Since the prisoners lived together in a group of men only, it felt a bit like I was among a bunch of manly jocks. While the air was filled with shrieks and jeers, they seemed to be enjoying themselves. A few managed to escape Belgo and grab a tomato from the basket with their own hands.

“So that’s what it tastes like!”

“It’s juicy! I like it!”

“Really? I don’t fancy it too much... The smell’s a bit too much...”

“Me neither. The smell is strong, but the slimy inside is even worse!”

All those grim fellows munching on tomatoes was a strangely funny yet endearing sight to behold. There were several people who did not like the taste, but none of them refused to eat them. Moreover, the reasons cited for not liking the taste were the smell and texture. In that case, it was mostly just a question of preparing it the right way.

“Since we all finished poison-tasting the raw tomatoes, I propose we start preparing lunch! Who is in charge of cooking today? Please come help me!”

Some of them put on a tough look and started vocalizing their actions. Ever since arriving in the city, I had had several new cooking pupils, but none of them were as eager as these guys. They only had a few pleasures. As convicts, they were only provided with the bare necessities for their daily lives, which in my view did not even amount to the bare minimum, and they did not have access to any small luxuries.

Those bare necessities of course included groceries, which meant that the prisoners could spend their time preparing them with great care, cooking delicious meals. *I dare say a very efficient pastime.*

I was helping the quite decent convicts with that pastime as much as possible. I frequently bought them ingredients, cookware, and firewood, so that they would not run out. As a result, they were all very grateful to me. Although I would have been fine without any thanks too. If the prisoners served their time without any dissatisfaction, that helped to keep up the public order, which was an important issue for anyone living in the city, including me. Unfortunately, there were not enough resources to simply leave that job to the prison guards.

Additionally, I had an interest in improving the living environment of my co-workers, since that would lead directly to an increase in productivity. And above anything else, they enjoyed the time-consuming and tedious task of cooking! They even did it for free!

They refused to compromise on any front when it came to their food, and as such, what they cooked was on a whole other level than the dishes served at restaurants and bars in the city. Since they were still prisoners in charge of waste disposal, it could not be helped that people avoided them, but their meals were popular among the guards in the barracks as well as the nursing staff. I was also allowed to eat their delicious food—which even Chef Yacoo would have approved of—together with them, and could even take the leftovers back to the dormitory to eat on my days off. I felt ashamed to be thanked on top of all that. In secret, I also gave some of the food to Lady Maika, Lady Reina, and Lord Arthur. It had to be kept a secret from Mrs. Rihn, although considering her wit I was sure she had started to notice.

Anyway, now the prisoners could add yet another item to their menu: tomato puree! It took a lot of time to make it from raw tomatoes, but the process was not difficult. Furthermore, the puree could be used as sauce or stew too.

“Ash, we grilled the bread!”

“We fried the cooked tomatoes with the smoked pork, just like you said we should. Does this look alright?”

Pile them on top of each other!

In reality, I had wanted to make pizza, but with the current cookware that would have probably ended in failure, so I had settled for pizza-style bread, like a panini. We placed bacon and tomato sauce on top of a loaf of bread that had

been grilled in a pan. Then, we sprinkled it with some expensive cheese before reheating it one last time. *Done! Time to dig in.*

“Everyone, enjoy the meal!”

As I started saying grace, all the other prisoners joined in. It appeared that they had naturally adapted the practice only after seeing me do it repeatedly. They were probably the best-mannered prisoners in this entire world.

“Woah, this is great. It tastes different from the raw tomatoes!”

“The sour and sweet taste goes well with the meat! This would be nice as a stew too!”

“Yeah, it’s great with the meat, but also with the bread. I love the taste of the soaked loaf!”

Everyone greedily devoured their meals. There were no longer any doubts regarding the poison in their minds.

As for me, I was focused on enjoying my first tomato dish in over a year. Tomatoes were really great. These had taken up a lot more time and effort than the ones in the village, and the difference in taste was remarkable. If I continued eating them like this every day and there were no side effects, I could easily submit a report to the temple and receive approval.

The theory of poisonous tomatoes had taken me off guard, but a positive resolution was on the horizon. I was yet another step closer to my ideal life. I had to make sure not to forget to take back the leftovers, or Lady Maika, who already knew the taste of tomatoes, would end up getting mad at me. This was yet another step towards a brighter tomorrow.

Maika’s Perspective

Today I was yet again separated from Ash. Unfortunately, that had been a frequent occurrence recently. Nevertheless, I refrained from letting out a sigh. *This is for Ash! Yes!* I felt fired up.

After lunch, I held a study group at the cafeteria, where we went over the materials from the morning classes at the temple. There were some people

whom I had to send home. Since this study group was an extension of Ash's missionary work, I did not allow any Ash haters to participate.

"Let's get started then! If you need any advice, please raise your hands!"

The dispersed participants answered in an energetic tone. They were all excellent students.

"Today we're going over multiplication. As it is harder than addition, I'm sure many of you will have some trouble, so let's take it slowly. How about we use a sack of wheat as an example? If you have a sack of wheat with ten servings inside and there are three sacks, how many servings do you have?"

After I laid out the question, one student raised their hand.

"Yes, Hermes?"

"Are there ten servings in all three sacks of wheat?"

"Oh, my bad! I should have been clearer. Yes, there are ten servings in all three of them."

I had not expected them to get stuck on that part. That was quick and sharp, or rather pedantic. When Ash had asked me a similar question, I had never even questioned the premise and just assumed it was the same. Ash had warned me that there may be students who try to tease me. That warning in itself was very mature and cool and...

"In that case, the answer is 30 servings."

As I was ruminating over my interactions with Ash, Hermes answered the question. I needed to pay attention. Ash had the power to distract both my mind and my feelings. Apparently, this was referred to as an "addiction." Or in other words, Ash was highly addictive.

"Yeah, that is correct! You're fast at math."

"Thanks." He lowered his head and closed his mouth again.

He was not very talkative, but judging from the study group so far, he was smart and motivated. It was a case of still waters running deep.

While I considered him to be a capable person, Reina, who acted as my

assistant, seemed to object. “Hermes, you are good at math, but you need to work on your language. We are supposed to learn manners here at the academy too. It might take you some time to get used to it, but please be aware of that.”

“Ok—”

Reina glared at him.

“I mean... Yes, ma’am...”

“Very well.” Reina looked pleased after hearing Hermes correct himself. She paid great attention to detail. I tended to let these things go because I thought it was kind of refreshing.

“Hermes was really quick, but how about everyone else? Did you know the answer? Please raise your hand if you didn’t! Arthur and Reina will help explain it!”

Several hands went up. I imagined there were quite a few boys and girls who reacted to the mention of Reina and Arthur. I knew how they felt! I would have also raised my hand if it was Ash who helped explain! And while some of them may have had ulterior motives, them raising their hands made it easier for the students who may have been too embarrassed to reach out on their own. It all worked out!

“Let’s separate into groups then. I’ll keep going for those who understood it. The problems will get harder, but if you take your time and use the same approach, you will be able to solve them!”

On the one hand, I wondered if we could make it to double-digit multiplication today. On the other hand, it felt strange to be doing this, considering I had not been able to calculate myself until recently. I had not believed I was capable of this. Nor had I even imagined anything like this existed. It was all thanks to Ash. He had shown me so many things and taught me how to embrace the future. He had given me a purpose. And now it was my turn to teach everyone else. I wanted to help them expand their view of the world and find a way forward. Hopefully they were going to see the same light that Ash had shown me back then. I was more than happy to share this wonderful light with everyone if they could see it. All I expected in return was

for them to go out and spread it even further. The world was prettier, kinder, and much more fun when seen in that light. And full of delicious stuff!

As we continued our session, an inviting smell wafted our way from the kitchen. Since we were in the cafeteria, that was to be expected, but it disrupted our study group. How would anyone be able to concentrate once their stomach started to grumble? The session was doomed to fail! Or maybe not. This was not so much a study group as it was a gathering to propagate the word of Ash under the guise of studying! I wanted everyone to appreciate how amazing Ash was. I didn't really care about the studying, that was just a bait. Although Ash had become quite invested in the studying aspect of these gatherings... But it was nothing new for Ash to act differently than expected, so I didn't mind too much!

All went according to my plan, as everyone slowly became intrigued by the sweet and savory smell coming from the kitchen. Even the serious Glen and untalkative Hermes could not help themselves! Arthur and Reina, who were instigators themselves, started fidgeting! And I was reaching my limits too. Now was the time to start the operation!

"Alright, good work everyone! That's enough for today! I'm sure you've noticed the delicious smell."

Especially the girls replied enthusiastically.

"I see you're all as curious as I am! Yacoo, please bring it out!"

They all sat in awe when Yacoo appeared with a large plate. As usual, everyone went silent faced with his threatening aura, but they were considerably less tense due to the sweet smell lingering in the air. Everyone's eyes were drawn to the large plate in his hands.

"I saw y'all working hard from the kitchen. I hope this will help motivate ya!"

He placed a large pancake on the table with a thud. It was a dream-like size, big enough for everyone in the study group to get a piece. Tender, sweet steam rose from its appetizing golden-brown surface. *Wow! This looks amazing!* But I did not expect anything less from a cook whom even Ash sought out for knowledge. Just looking at the pancake made me feel like jumping up and ecstatically dancing around.

“Chef Yacoo, this is amazing! This smell... Is it a cake?” Reina inhaled the smell with a smile on her face. She had quite a sweet tooth.

“Yeah, it looks delicious. What kind of cake is it?” Arthur asked with anticipation.

“It’s a Tanya pancake!” Yacoo answered in a low voice, puffing out his chest.

Yes, this was indeed a creation of Noscula village’s own beekeeper! The Tanya pancake! I also puffed out my chest next to Yacoo. This had been a request from me and Ash. We had even covered the cost of all the ingredients, so I had every right to be proud!

“Tanya? Is that the name of the person who came up with the recipe?” Reina asked as we were both puffed up with pride.

Naturally, they wouldn’t have known who she was without any explanation...

Or so I thought. Arthur reacted to the mention of the name. “Isn’t that the person who started beekeeping in Noscula village? So that sweet smell must be honey!”

“How did you know? Did you hear from Ash?”

“Oh, yes, a little while ago.”

Arthur seemed embarrassed, as his face and ears turned red again. I felt uneasy seeing that expression, but I realized it was a natural reaction. It was much better than suppressing your emotions. I was sure Ash had encouraged him to show his feelings more. Since Ash was brighter than the summer sun, just being by his side increased one’s power hundredfold. But anyway, now was time to enjoy the Tanya pancake!

“When we were studying at the church back at Noscula village, Tanya regularly used to bring us these pancakes.”

Of course, only after she started beekeeping. Since there weren’t many sweets in the village, I had always looked forward to them. There were even some children who started joining our study session lured by their smell.

“According to Ash, the recipe itself is quite simple and probably similar to that of other cakes. However, since this one uses the honey collected by Tanya in

Noscula village, it's called the Tanya pancake."

Yacoo nodded in agreement. "She's right. I know a similar recipe. There are some small differences with the proportions and the heating temperature, but calling it the Tanya pancake makes sense, since she's the collector of the honey."

"Now, please enjoy today's reward, the Tanya pancake!" *Let's not lose any more time and eat!*

At once, I dug my spoon into the golden-brown dough. At that moment, the sweet smell became even stronger! The Tanya pancake was characteristically a little soft in the middle, with its edges being crisp. Since it was so big, the edge naturally ended up firmer after cooking it. *Here I go! It's so good!* The slightly burnt edge had its own unique taste. I loved sweet foods. I melted alongside the pancake in my mouth.

"This is amazing!!"

"Yeah, it's delicious."

Reina and Arthur both loudly expressed their delight. Usually they were very elegant and refined, but they couldn't help raising their voices. As Reina basked in the attention as usual, Arthur closed his mouth and sat in slight embarrassment as everyone stared at him.

"You're right! It's so good!"

"Yeah, I like it. I feel like the gentle sweetness of the honey calms me down."

Right? Right?

To Tanya, this was the taste of family. It reminded her of her dad when he was still alive, and of her mom, who always made the pancakes. When Tanya had made them for us, Jigil had ground the wheat and Ban had gathered the eggs from wild birds, shaping it into the taste of her new family. Of course it was going to have a gentle taste! It was a recipe born from the strong bonds of family. Honey, wheat, and eggs were the only ingredients. All you had to do was mix them together and then cook that mix. Simple yet so delicious!

"Hehe, Ash wanted to share some of the new honey that he's received from

Tanya.”

Yes, you had heard right! Ash was providing the honey! *Let me say it one more time: Ash made this delicious dessert possible!*

“Since Ash is busy with the plan that was approved by my uncle—I mean, Lord Itsuki, and can’t come to the study group very often, he wanted you to enjoy this dessert as a small apology,” I explained.

Ash had also covered the costs for the eggs and firewood. Quid had provided the wheat from Noscula village for free! Yacoo had been more than willing to cooperate, so it didn’t take too much effort to make these pancakes.

“Oh, really? In that case, I’m gonna have to thank him next time I see him.”

“Yeah, I should thank him for taking us into consideration even though he’s so busy.”

“This is good. Sooo good!”

“Slow down, you idiot boys! You should savor it to show your appreciation! And make sure to leave enough for everyone!”

It was a great success! Hehe, it was already starting to take effect. I had tried imitating the crepe strategy that Ash had used on Reina. As he had said, it was better to make friends by offering them something delicious rather than threatening them right away. *Yet another lesson I’ve learned from you, Ash!*

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“Dewicious!!”

Lady Maika voiced her enjoyment of the pizza bread that she was chewing. It was endearing to see her rounded cheeks and a bit of tomato sauce around her mouth.

In the late afternoon, after we were both finished with all our tasks for the day, we treated ourselves to a snack break. We sat in front of the dormitory’s kitchen garden, since no one apart from our fellow collaborators ever approached this area. Well, no one apart from those guys who came around to make snide remarks about me. Fortunately, they stayed away today, so we could peacefully enjoy our break from the hard work.

“Your tomato dishes are the best!”

“Everyone helped make it, so no wonder it turned out great!”

I agreed as I took a small slice of the bread for myself. Since Chef Yacoo’s dinner was still coming up I had to refrain from eating too much or else I was going to regret it, but I could not help myself when I saw how much Lady Maika was enjoying the food.

“I feel sad thinking about how the others can’t even taste this.”

“Me too. There is no harm in having a wide variety of dishes.”

I had to finish the report so that at least all the students at the academy were going to be able to enjoy tomato dishes by next summer. Once it gained popularity among the future leaders at the academy, it was likely going to diffuse quickly to more remote regions too. Increasing your food options was always good.

After finishing our snacks, we both started talking about our days. Ever since I had become busy helping out Sir George and the prisoners, we promised to meet up to report our daily activities to each other. It all started with Lady Maika saying, “I don’t even know what you’re doing anymore these days! That’s not fair!”

“Other than making Belgo and the prisoners eat tomatoes, I did nothing special. Just my usual work of looking after the compost.”

“That does sound like a quiet day for you... Although I can’t help but feel that there is a bit more to the part where you made them eat tomatoes than you are letting on...”

What are you assuming about me?

“Everything went according to plan on my end too! Everyone in the study group is doing fine reading and writing, and they are getting pretty good at calculating!” Lady Maika proudly puffed out her chest.

I noticed how she appeared more mature, either due to the better nutrition here in the city or possibly to puberty. Girls of her age grew more beautiful by the day, and I would have loved to send a picture to her parents every day. *Mrs.*

Yuika and Mr. Klein, your beloved daughter is slowly turning into an adult.

“Mother Yae praised us, saying that we may be the year with the highest standards in the history of the academy!”

“That is wonderful. That praise is also directed at your teaching.”

“Hehe, I’m just applying the Master Folke method as I learned it from you. Of course it would work even in the city!”

By the way, Lady Maika was hosting a study group which was essentially a branch off edition of Master Folke’s church school. Of course, Master Folke, who was crazy about his research, would have never left the village. Therefore, just as I had taught Lady Maika back at the village, she was now teaching others. She was using my methods or, if you asked her, Master Folke’s methods, and as such it was essentially an extension of the study group in Noscula village. The reputation of that lovable fool researcher went up without him doing anything at all.

The study group was made up of influential people from outside Itsutsu city, with a focus on people from the outskirts of the city. Lady Maika said that this composition was a result of her attempt to gather a resistance to Moldo, who held influence inside the city. While I would not have minded just leaving him alone, it appeared that Lady Maika was acting on her statement of opposing him. Needless to say, she had neither engaged in any reckless behavior like kicking him nor stooped to Moldo’s level of propagating slander. Everyone was seriously studying, discussing their hometowns, and talking about their experiences in the city. It was just a regular, friendly classroom.

Eventually, they were going to read books and summarize their contents to gain knowledge for their future activities. I did not understand how any of this was going to work as a countermeasure to Moldo, but I did not care either. The study group had the hidden power to increase my collaborators, increase productivity, and improve the living environment surrounding the city. Whenever I was free, I helped however I could. And at the very least, the effectiveness of Moldo’s slander had been dampened, or in some cases even rendered null and void.

The very honest Glen had approached me during one of the sessions, saying,

“You may be a bit of an oddball, but you’re a decent person.” Apparently, he had thought I was out of my mind judging from the slander and all my activities in the city. After talking to me at the study group, he had realized it was all a misunderstanding. Although I could only reply with a strained smile when he had called me an oddball directly to my face. Putting that aside, Glen was an honest, good boy. Someone who can say, “I’m sorry for judging you prematurely,” was raised the right way and was sure to become popular.

“Reina and Arthur have also gotten used to teaching! At this rate, they’ll also be able to teach math in fall!”

“That is good news! Finally, we are approaching the next stage!”

The world of essay writing! First, it was probably best to have them do practice in groups summarizing a single topic. Or maybe we could start by having them evaluate something we had written. Or even better, we could form a group with me and Lady Maika at the center, where we could get straight to writing practice.

“Ash? Hello? Please calm down! You’re running off again!”

“Do you think so? Is it not more efficient to make plans in advance, so you are prepared when the time comes?”

“No, when you’re smiling like that, you’re running off way too fast for any normal person.”

I felt a resolute but mysterious energy radiating off her smile. It was as if she was a mother bird in fighting mode protecting her little chick. However, in my pursuit of my dreams, my ideal life, I had turned into a demigod who would not even show mercy to his childhood friend.

“By the way, Ash.”

“What is it?”

Oh? Lady Maika had suddenly taken the initiative.

“Did you know that George’s lesson tomorrow is canceled?”

“Yes, as his assistant I have to be aware of his schedule. Apparently, there was a report which he could not ignore, so he will be going on a special patrol

around the city.”

“Ah, I forgot. Yeah, it would have been weirder if you didn’t know. Well, I was wondering if you maybe wanted to go to the administrative hall together tomorrow, during that time. You know, instead of doing self-study. I asked them if we could help with their work.”

The administrative hall?! “What work would we be helping them with?”

“Since they know that we’ve been writing the reports for our village, they want us to double-check the data relating to their budget and resources. Do you want to come?”

“Yes! I would love to go!”

If I gained insight into that kind of data, I might be able to determine whether or not I can obtain certain resources in this region. There were a lot of materials like coal, sulfuric acid, fire-resistant stone, or all sorts of metal which would come in handy. I could not miss this chance no matter what other tasks I had to push aside.

She smiled like the Holy Mother after hearing my straightforward reply. “I knew I could count on you! Let’s go to the administrative hall together tomorrow then!”

“Yes, let us do our best reviewing all those documents!”

I could not wait! Any information relating to resources was considered sensitive and unavailable to outsiders, so it was not kept at the temple either. Or maybe it was hidden away somewhere, but either way, I did not have the reading privileges. There must have been some circumstances for Mother Yae, with whom I had become very friendly, to not let me see them.

I wondered how much I was going to be able to read in one day tomorrow. If I did not manage to read everything, I needed to find out how I could get to help them again. It looked like I was going to become busy again! It was going to be fun yet painful!

As I was racking my brain, next to me Lady Maika clenched her fist as if she had successfully completed a job. “Yes! I kept control, Mom!”

She had kept control? What was she talking about? Judging from the content of our conversation, I had a growing suspicion that she was referring to me.

Summer in the city went by in a flash. Sir George's classes were still canceled more often than not, and we continued to spend our days helping out at the administrative hall. While I told everyone in the study group that he was just busy as usual, I knew that it was more serious than that. Since I was assisting Sir George in managing the equipment, I had no choice but to know.

For example, the ballistae on the city wall were usually stored away inside one of the towers, but these days half of them were basking in the sun on clear days. Locked and loaded. Only the other day, I had been in charge of preparing the spare parts. The ballistae needed to be ready since they could be used and/or destroyed at any moment.

There was no information about any large band of thieves in the area or tensions with neighboring cities. The danger came rather from a third type of common enemy who tended to unite humans—demons.

Over the course of history, demons had destroyed many cities and contributed to the decline of humanity. They were the natural enemy of humans in this world. They were undeniable—there were concrete signs of their existence.

Ever since I had heard about demons back at the village, I had been unsure what exactly they were, but now I had learned about them in class at the academy. Besides being tools for maintaining public order, weapons were mostly used to defend humanity from demons.

Given the circumstances, the gatekeepers stealthily cautioned me when I left the city on my way to see Belgo and his crew. "If anything happens, come running to us," they told me. They pointed at the ballista positioned above the gate. "This is the closest point from the prisoners' shack."

"Thank you for the warning. I will keep it in mind," I answered, praying I would not have to act upon it.

It had only been one year since I had fought Sir Bear and I did not intend on encountering Death yet again. Surely the Grim Reaper was too busy to come and see me again after such a short time.

As the shack came into my sight, I spotted Belgo waving at me. *Let's start another day of hard work!*

I had a strange sense of impending doom. It was similar to what I had experienced when a wolf had attacked me and Ban in the forest. Once a human felt that their life was in danger, the brain gave orders to prepare for war. This heightened one's awareness, resulting in clearer vision, the capacity to hear a broader sound spectrum, and a more sensitive sense of smell. In a way, the world appeared richer.

That sensation itself was not unfamiliar to anyone who hunted. However, usually it was triggered by an external stimulus, like the nervous predator's sweaty smell hanging in the air. Or the sound of footsteps grazing against the grass behind you. Or sharp, glowing eyes peeking out of dark bushes. As soon as the brain sensed one or more of these, it concluded that there was danger. However, strangely enough, this time around none of my five senses had picked up anything out of the ordinary. Neither my vision, nor my hearing, nor my taste, nor my sense of smell, nor my sense of touch. It felt like my brain, which was only supposed to process data with input from other organs, had just picked it up on its own. It seemed impossible unless there was some kind of telepathy or brain wave transmitter at work. I remembered certain professions employing such methods in my past life, but I had never come across them in this world.

As I ruminated, I fixed my gaze on the plain leading to the forest in the opposite direction of the city. I sensed something coming from there. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary. I blinked once. Everything seemed fine. I blinked again. Still fine. I blinked once more. There it was. It had the silhouette of a four-legged animal. Drawing from my experience, I concluded it must have been a wolf. Putting aside the strange omen, a stray wolf emerging from the forest was nothing special. I took one of the shovels that the prisoners used for waste disposal and warned Belgo and the others.

"Everyone, there is a wolf approaching from the forest! Grab something that you can use as a weapon—"

In the middle of my sentence, I realized something strange. The movements

of the approaching wolf silhouette were accompanied by a heavy bass sound. Just to be sure I took a look around, but I could not see anyone beating a drum. Therefore, there was no other option—it must have been the sound of the footsteps of that wolf, or rather wolf-like creature.

As the heavy bass sound grew louder, the silhouette became bigger too. Since the creature was running across an open field with no points of reference, it was hard to tell, but it appeared definitely bigger than a wolf. Then it hit me. My hunch had been right. A suspicious figure that showed itself after reports of demons outside the city and an impending sense of doom. Was this a demon?

“Belgo, close the gate! Quickly!”

“Don’t have to tell me twice!” He complied with a pale face.

“Can some of you let the farmers know?”

The demon was already close enough to get a look at its expression. Belgo wavered for a moment. Understandably so. Anyone seeing this ferocious creature would have wanted to get away as fast as possible without any detours. However, the people on the farm were important personnel. As I had learned through my life at the village, people with knowledge of livestock farming were hard to come by.

“I will buy you some time. It will be the first time I am fighting a demon, so I cannot guarantee anything, but I will try my best.”

“What are you saying? You wanna fight a demon?!”

I know. You don’t have to scream with your eyes wide open.

Either way, I could not think of any other method, and I did not intend to abandon the prisoners and the farmers. Or, in other words, I had to abide by my ideals. Once I had decided to act, there was no going back.

“There is no use in arguing. Just do as I say. I order you as the adjutant of Sir George. Belgo, Zebb, Am, Moddy, run to the farm and let them know what is going on. Everyone else, inform the guards at the gate about the demon attack.” I did not want to hear any objections. I might have only been 11, but I gave orders with as much dignity as possible. “Everyone, move out!”

The orders were barely effective. They caught their breaths before running off. Only Belgo stayed behind for a moment. “Make sure to survive! And come show yourself later!”

I turned my back on him as he quickly ran off towards the farm. I greatly appreciated Belgo’s bravery. Once all this was over, I was going to get him a large serving of his favorite meat.

As all of this was happening, the demon had shifted its course. It was no longer running straight towards me, but in the direction of Belgo and the others. *This is bad.*

“I will not let you off so easily!”

I picked up some stones from the ground with the shovel. It was time to see how well this tool that I had steeled through hard labor, day in and day out, could perform.

I lifted it up and threw the stones using centrifugal force. It was almost like a catapult. The first shot hit the mark. *I might be a natural at this.* However, I was surprised at the sound of the impact.

“That... was a very metallic sound.”

I did not understand, but it should not have been a surprise. I remembered hearing Sir George say during one of his lectures that werewolves, a subspecies of demons, had metallic fur. As such, he told us to treat them as if they were wearing chain mail or scale armor.

The stone-throwing did not cause any injury to the demon, but it managed to redirect its attention towards me again as it kept getting faster. It sounded as if the werewolf’s whole body was filled with coins jingling. Then, it suddenly stopped in its tracks. There was no doubt that its glazed, iron blue fur was indeed made of metal. I had wanted it to be a bad joke, but it looked like it was true after all.

Why are the odds always stacked against humans in fantasy settings? Swearing to myself, I glared at the werewolf. An indescribable, ferocious bloodlust radiated from its eyes, possibly fueled by my earlier stone-throwing. While smaller than Sir Bear, the werewolf stood still taller than me. It must have

measured about two meters from the tip of its snout to the rear end, excluding the tail. In some regards, it also resembled a wild boar. If I had to define it, I would have said it was a hybrid human beast. Or rather a demon beast, since it did not seem like there was much humanity left in it.

As I was lost in thought, a creaking, twisted sound coming from the werewolf's body put me on alert. It stretched out its forelegs and broadened its shoulders while bending its spine.

"I see, you really are a werewolf after all."

The monster transformed into its bipedal form. The prolonged forelegs had already turned into full-fledged arms, surely giving it a more diverse attack range than any four-legged animal would have had. Standing on its hind legs, the violent, imposing figure easily exceeded two meters. *I'm repeating myself, but why are the odds always stacked against humans in fantasy settings?!*

While I was fed up with the unfair circumstances, the werewolf let out a menacingly loud roar, letting me know that he was not going to let me escape. He was determined to kill. *But I'll have you know, Sir Werewolf, that I'm not the type of person to shrivel from that.*

"You seem angry. Well, to be fair, I did throw stones at you."

After all, I was angry too.

"I want you to understand how rude it is of you to just suddenly interrupt my sprint towards my dreams. Do you realize how much I writhed about while going through both joy and pain?"

Since I had come to the city, both my resources and funds had increased. I had more goals than ever and I had managed to achieve more things than before. I had gained friends. I was closer to achieving my dreams than ever before. And with every step, my desire grew stronger and less patient. It was a natural outcome. I had spent time and effort. I had used up resources. I had received help from so many people who entrusted me with their hopes and expectations. I had no choice but to achieve my goals. The more I put into my ambitions, the stronger they grew. My dream-chasing frenzy was even more unstoppable now than it had been back at the village. And anyone who jumped out in front of me had to be prepared to get steamrolled.

“I am warning you—I will pulverize you with everything I have got for interfering with my dreams!”

I readied myself, lifting up the shovel. My aim was the raised right arm of the werewolf. The beast was the first to make a move. The metallic sound of its blunt right arm crashing into my defending shovel reverberated across the plain. After parrying, I tried to counterattack with my shovel, but I was intercepted by its left arm. Its reaction was beyond imagination. Even though its skin was solid, the muscles on the inside were as flexible as rubber. Apparently, it did not even feel the impact.

Since I had no way of dealing any significant damage through its metallic fur, I had to aim for the soft parts—his eyes and mouth. However, I was not sure how to go about it. I did not have any time to think either. Sir Werewolf bent over and attacked me at a speed that felt like a time-lapse. He repeatedly thrust his nails of steel at me, swinging downward and back up again. The attack was so powerful that any hit would have certainly ripped my torso apart.

But I had no time to be afraid. If I had closed my eyes, I would not have been able to see his attacks, so I kept them open. I had to make sure my view did not narrow due to nervousness or I would not have been able to follow his quick movements. If my limbs had shivered, my movements would have grown dull. Therefore, I released as much strength as possible to stay agile. If he had gained even one inch on me, I would have been torn to pieces, so I kept pressing forward while warding off the incoming attacks.

I killed my fear and kept fighting with composure and a cool head. I did not consider myself to be a fighter, but I excelled at withstanding fear. I used that to my advantage in this battle for life and death. I handled it the same way as my practice matches with Lady Maika. My arms tingled with each metallic sound. The edge of the shovel was already tattered, and the old wooden handle was not in good shape either. It was hard to breathe. My head felt heavy. I was about to faint. I did not know for how long we had been exchanging blows, and I did not know how long it would keep going.

“Aargh!”

Possibly sensing that I had reached my limits, Sir Werewolf launched a

powerful attack which snapped the damaged shovel in two. However, I was not done yet. As compensation for the wrecked shovel, I managed to use the force of the strong blow to retreat to a safe distance.

Before recovering my breath, I reached for the small porcelain bottle that I kept around my waist. I was indeed not much of a fighter. Even Lord Arthur had raised doubts, saying, “How did you beat a bear with those skills?” But the answer was simple: I had not used my fighting skills to defeat the bear. Among other things, I had relied on my fearlessness and my knowledge of poison. This bottle pertained to the latter category. Ever since the Sir Bear incident, I had perfected my poison for self-defense. Now was the time to put it to the test.

The bottle was just small enough to clutch it with my hand, and I aimed it at the werewolf’s face. Its body was bent over a bit, but it did not seem like it made any effort to evade. Considering that the earlier stone throw had not damaged it at all, it must not have considered the bottle a threat worthy of evasion. That was a fatal mistake. The porcelain bottle broke and the red viscous liquid inside stuck to the face of the werewolf. One second later, the sturdy demon held its face writhing in agony. *Hehe, I guess you can’t handle spices?*

Inside the bottle was a concentrated solution of the spicy component capsaicin, which had been extracted from chili peppers soaked in alcohol. The formula described it as a pesticide to protect crops from harmful animals and insects. Unfortunately, the cost of distilling alcohol made it impossible to widely use it as a pesticide, but it worked fine as a tear-inducing solution. This was one of the self-defense measures that I had taken after fighting with Sir Bear. Since it was non-lethal, it was easy to carry around, and considering that I was involved with important people like Lady Maika and Lord Arthur, I always had a bottle with me.

With a heavy breath, I jumped at a pitchfork to use it as my next weapon. Sir Werewolf was in too much pain to pay any attention to my movements. The fiery hot ingredient must have entered his eyes and nose directly. I did not even want to imagine how painful that was. Just looking at it I felt pity, so I decided to finish the beast off.

I cautiously walked around the monster to aim for the head. Since it was

rolling about while scratching its face in pain, it was difficult to get a clear shot at the eyes or mouth. However, due to its own scratching, parts of the skin had come off to a point where I could probably penetrate it with the pitchfork. *Here I go!* I hit the skull and the pitchfork slipped. *I guess I'll need several hard blows. Let's try again! And again...!*

It was no use. It was harder than I had assumed. I was not able to kill him at all. Besides, it looked like his face had reverted back to normal. Since he was covered in blood, I had not noticed right away, but the bleeding had stopped. The injuries from the pitchfork had also turned into mere surface scratches.

“You have got to be kidding me...”

I had learned from Sir George that demons had fast recovery powers, but seeing it heal in less than a minute in front of my eyes still made me question all logic. This was the power of a demon. *Why does this world allow such a supernatural phenomenon just because it's a demon? And why does it keep stacking the odds against humans again?*

Either way, this was bad. I did not carry around a second bottle. If I did not use this chance, I was going to be driven into a corner. I tried to stab one of his eyeballs, only to realize it was looking straight at me. At the same moment that I swung down my pitchfork, the werewolf raised its right arm. I heard the sound of its nails scraping the skin off my left collarbone before feeling the pain. I clenched my teeth and pressed my whole body against the pitchfork. As a result, the nails penetrated even further into my left shoulder, but I did not care. I was piercing Sir Werewolf's right eye in return. Two different cries of pain echoed across the plain: one a beastly roar, another a human scream. They sounded desperate.

We had reached a critical moment with both of us on the brink of taking the other's life. If only I had been a little older, I would have been taller and bigger, making it easier to push through. Finally, I penetrated the hard skull and pierced a soft mass. From my experience as a hunter, I knew I was now gouging his brain. The werewolf's giant body unnaturally jumped up and its right arm started spasming before falling to the ground.

“Yes!”

After I pushed in the pitchfork a little more to make sure it was dead, I let go of it. Instinctively, I staggered back two or three steps. At once, fatigue came over my whole body. My arms as well as my legs and groin felt like worn-out rubber from parrying the werewolf's strong attacks. It seemed that I had pushed myself past my limit.

"My left shoulder hurts too... Hopefully it will not fester..."

I also wanted to avoid another scolding from Lady Maika. Once again, it was not like I had wanted to fight. I appreciated her concern, but I also hoped she would understand. Although I realized that, based on my past experience, that was just wishful thinking. At the very least I did not want my mother to find out back at the village. If she did not know, at least I could evade one scolding.

As I inspected the wound on my left shoulder, thinking about a way to stop the bleeding, I heard a sound. It was the sound of the pitchfork falling to the ground. I turned my tired head around, only to find the werewolf looking down upon me.

"Are you already awake again?"

Had he reincarnated? He did not look any different, so he had probably just resurrected himself. Its right eye, which I had stabbed with the pitchfork earlier, stared at me as it was regenerating. *What a load of nonsense.*

While I was caught by surprise, Sir Werewolf came straight at me with its fangs. I felt a new pain as its fangs sunk into my left shoulder, but I prevented the beast from biting it off.

"I will not yield! I am a huntsman apprentice after all! I am Ban's best pupil!"

My mind was blank, but my body moved on its own, remembering Ban's teachings. My right hand had reflexively drawn the dagger from my waist and shoved it into the wide-open mouth. Ban had given me this dagger during one of our hunts. It was a sacred tool of hunters used to finish off their prey, but it was also used as a self-defense weapon once you were out of arrows and spears.

I made eye contact with Sir Werewolf. I imagined it wanted to bite down, tearing into my shoulder and chest. However, my dagger was stuck inside its

mouth, pointed towards its skull. If the beast closed its jaws in this position, the dagger was going to stab right into its brain.

“What are you going to do? Do you want to try and attack at the same time? Do you think I will die from this?”



If the monster did think that, it was probably right. Under the current circumstances, I was likely going to die. *But surely you don't want to take the risk? Come on, open your mouth!*

I was quite scared that the beast did not care at all, considering it had just survived having its brain gouged. If I had been able to push the dagger further, the werewolf surely would have let go, but unfortunately, its fangs were also sinking into my right hand, preventing any real movement. Besides, the excruciating pain made it impossible to move. What was I going to do? There was not much that I could do in this position. I could only wait for the werewolf's next move.

We both glared at each other while frantically breathing. *Hurry up and let go!* My right hand had gone numb. Was this it? Was the only option left to wait for one of us to run out of strength? That was bad. In that case, I was definitely going to lose. Even I turned pale at that thought. However, Sir Werewolf readily opened his mouth and let me go.

"...What happened?"

I wondered why the beast had withdrawn even though it was sure to win if it only waited long enough. Prepared to go at it again, I readied my dagger, but the werewolf was ignoring me. It was looking at something behind me.

As I pondered my next course of action, I heard the sound of a horse's hooves coming from behind me, followed by a spear passing right beside me. The cavalry had arrived! Although, in this case, the cavalry was Sir George—all by himself. Showing great fighting spirit, he threw down the werewolf to the ground with a single spear strike.

Sir George turned his horse around to face me. "Ash, hold on to me!"

"Yes, sir!"

Sir George wanted to retreat after a single strike. That made sense. His appearance meant that Belgo and the others had informed the guards at the gate of the demon attack. All that was left to do now was to lure the werewolf into the firing range of the trusted ballista. That was their purpose after all.

I whipped up my exhausted body and jumped up from behind onto the horse.

I did not have any strength left in either arm, and it felt like I was going to fall off at any moment.

“Ash, you did a great job!”

Sir George propped me up with his strong arm. *How smooth. I can see why Mother Yae would fall for him. I'll leave the rest to you. That's ok, right? I can't do it anymore. I'm at my limit.* I felt my consciousness drifting while clinging to Sir George.

As the city gate came into sight, a heavy bass sound approached from behind. Several spear-like projectiles came flying from the ballistae on the city wall, and before I knew it, the sound had stopped.

Even though I had closed my eyelids, I could see something flickering. Somehow, I vividly recalled a memory from my past life. Was this my life flashing before me before it all ended? I had thought my wounds were not as serious as when I had fought Sir Bear, but maybe I was wrong. I could not see any clear signs, but it felt like the Grim Reaper stood close by. It looked like this was going to be my third round with Death. The first round I lost when I died in my past life, and the second one I edged out a win after surviving my battle with Sir Bear, making it a tie. I was starting to get used to this. *Do your worst, I'll take the lead.*

Arthur's Perspective

A werewolf had appeared outside the city wall. I was not too surprised when I learned that news. Of course, I was not calm either. In the capital city, demons had not shown up for the past 100 years or so. In that regard, I did catch my breath when I heard that one of them was right outside. However, it was nothing compared to my shock at the news that came afterwards.

Following the orders of the knights who had been dispatched for protection, the study group was canceled. We returned to the guarded dormitory, where we were unable to calm down. Everyone was agitated and gathered in the lobby when the real surprise rolled in.

“Doesn't that knight on the horse look like...?”

“Yeah, that’s him!”

I heard two members of the study group, Glen and his roommate, talk in an unsettling tone. Naturally and unconsciously, my eyes fixated in the direction they were looking. I had a bad feeling about this situation, but I could not keep myself from looking. There was a knight on a horse running past the dormitory towards the mansion. It was indeed Sir George, who was clenching his teeth. He was covered in blood from his neck downwards. That took me by surprise... But I was even more surprised when I heard Maika murmur next to me.

“...Ash?”

It couldn’t be. I didn’t believe it. I didn’t want to believe it. Ash was a child, a student at the army academy. He had almost officially become an adjutant to Sir George, but it was not like he had been formally appointed. There was no way he would have been standing on the firing line of a demon attack. At the same time, strangely, Ash had not yet returned to the dormitory. And it was true that a child-like figure was holding onto Sir George’s blood-drenched body. Above anything, and while I didn’t want to believe it, there was no way that Maika would have mistaken Ash.

“Arthur, follow me!”

“Wah?!”

Maika pulled me along as my mind had blanked. She was very strong. Our physiques weren’t that different, but it felt like an adult was pulling me. Before I knew it, we arrived at my room. What were we doing here? Shouldn’t we be looking after Ash?

“M-Maika, calm down!”

“I’m fine. You should try and relax a bit yourself.” Compared to my shaking voice, Maika’s tone was sharp and on point. “Ash should be keeping some medicine here. And a white cloth to bind the wound. We’re going to take it to Ash.”

“What?”

She went ahead and just opened Ash’s cabinet and handed me the supplies.

“What do you mean by ‘take it to Ash’?”

“They were both covered in blood. It’s probably all Ash’s. That means there was no time for any first aid. Since they came here, that probably means that Sir George is carrying him to the mansion’s doctor.” She took some supplies herself and stood up. “I’ll help treat his wounds. I’ve done it before.”

She was chewing her lips. I had heard that once she had been hard at work to treat a severely-wounded Ash after the bear incident.

“Let’s go! Help me carry these supplies.”

“S-Sure!”

She was running fast. I ran at full speed too, but I couldn’t keep up with her.

“Stupid Ash...”

I heard some mumbled words coming from Maika’s direction. I also saw some drops fall on the floor. I fully understood her. It was only natural for her to say those words. To look like that. To feel like that. I knew what she was going through. She liked Ash after all. I knew what she was going through all too well.

I had expected the guards and maids to stop us when we left the dormitory and entered the mansion, but none of them did. And it was not because of me. It was because they couldn’t stop Maika.

“Please get out of the way!”

Maika spoke in an aristocratic, leader-like tone to the waiting lady blocking the way to the guest room where Ash had been brought in judging from the tumult inside.

“Lady Maika, please!” the waiting lady pleaded.

“I’ve come to help with the treatment. I won’t repeat myself! Please get out of the way!”

The maid turned pale. She probably couldn’t fully believe what was happening. Neither could I. Maika was as resolute as ever. She had said those were her last words, so I wondered what was going to come out next. Her small hands were grasping the supplies tightly.

Meanwhile, the maid had already recovered from the pressure. Remembering whose relative stood in front of her, she replied in a firm voice, saying, “Lady Maika, the family doctor is already taking care of the treatment. It is the responsibility of us maids to help him. So please understand.”

It appeared that Maika wanted to say a few more words in response to the maid claiming that the necessary arrangements for the treatment had already been taken. Those carefully chosen words showed off her strength. “I brought the aloe ointment that Mr. Quid always delivers. I also brought a clean white cloth that is regularly washed. And I have painkillers and fever medicine.”

“Still...”

“Do you have enough knowledge of the situation to confidently stop me?”

The perplexed maid was saved by Sir George from the inside. “I heard what you said. Maika can come in. Besides, the doctor seems to need the supplies.” After having the maid move out of the way, he turned towards Maika. “I have to warn you—he is badly injured.”

“I will be fine. I want to be with the person I love.”

She was concise and unwavering in her reply. It was as if those words alone were enough. As if her feelings could make her do anything.

Sir George seemed to be dazzled by the reply and politely stepped away. “It was insensitive of me to stand in your way. Please come inside.”

She gave a quick nod and stepped inside. I followed her. The foul stench filling the air made me gag. It smelt as if life and death were fighting. And it all originated from the person lying on the bed.

He could not speak. The sheets of the guest bed were covered in blood and so was his body. Yes, this was Ash. But he was nowhere his usual self. He did not smile. He was sweating profusely, and his breath was faint as if it was about to stop at any moment. It all seemed like a bad dream. Nevertheless, it was so real and vivid.

“The bleeding has almost stopped already,” Maika proclaimed as she rolled up her sleeves and washed her arms in the prepared hot water.

How was he still so red if the bleeding had stopped? I could not believe it, but the doctor, who was holding a sewing needle, agreed. “Yes, he will probably be alright.”

“There are scratch wounds and bite marks... Did you clean the wound?”

“Just now. I was about to stitch it together.”

“Got it. I will hold him down while stopping the bleeding.”

“I’m counting on you.”

Maika looked at me. “Give me the cloth,” she ordered.

“Ah, y-yes.”

I took it out from the bag I was carrying and handed it to Maika, who pressed it against the wound on Ash’s left shoulder.

“Aaagh!!”

At that moment, Ash let out a moan.

“I’m sorry, Ash, please bear with me.”

“This is good. Keep pressing it down. Hey, someone grab the other arm and the legs!”

Hearing the doctor’s orders, two of the maids grabbed the legs. The third maid didn’t react right away. She looked weary, possibly from helping out earlier.

Sir George headed towards the remaining arm, but my body moved on its own. “Uhm... I-I’ll d-do it.”

My voice was shaking. As were my feet and hands... But my body had moved.

“Lord Arthur, are you sure?” he asked.

“Yes. You are covered in dirt, Sir George—that is not good for the wound.”

This was something that I had learned from Ash while we were doing research on composting. My body wasn’t perfectly clean either, but it was better than Sir George’s, who had ridden a horse outside.

“I will do it.”

After saying it out loud, I was shaking even more. I felt cold. So cold. It was strange. Why was I shivering? I hadn't felt this cold in a long while. I wondered why. Why had I stopped feeling this cold again? *Ah, right.* It had stopped because of Ash. His presence always warmed me up. That was why I had to muster up all of my courage and make my intentions clear.

"Please let me do it!"

Maika was the first to respond to my request. "Hey! Hurry up and hold him down!"

"Ah, y-yes..."

Sir George looked slightly concerned, but he kept quiet after inspecting his own body covered in dirt and blood. He couldn't do it.

I dragged along my freezing and shivering body to grasp Ash's right arm. It was cold. It was the first time that I felt Ash this cold.

"No, that's not good enough! You have to press down harder, with all your strength!"

"G-Got it!"

Following Maika's scolding, I pinned down Ash's right shoulder. It was still cold. Almost as if it wasn't Ash's. I was scared.

"Y-You'll get through this..."

Ash's body moved with each stitch. *That must hurt.* But if he struggled too much, it wouldn't be possible to treat him properly, so I pressed him down with my shivering arms. It was an eerie sensation, giving me goosebumps that wouldn't go away. Still, I kept using my shivering arms to press down.

"Hang in there, Ash..."

I wanted him to live. He was my friend who had kept me warm all this time. I had been so happy. He had become such an important person to me. If only I could have given my life to him... *I'm sorry I can't do that.* I was only able to hold down Ash while he was in terrible pain.

"I'm sorry..."

I'll apologize as much as you want. And I promise I'll help again with your research. So please... Don't die...!

Ash didn't wake up that day. When I returned to our room by myself, I found myself confronted by a surprisingly chilly atmosphere. I looked at the bottom bunk bed, and then at the stack of papers on the desk, but there was no trace of his usual warm laughter. What a lonely room. Now more than ever, I wanted to talk to Ash. I felt hopeless without him. The doctor had said that it all depended on Ash himself now. I was sure that someone like him was going to be fine. Someone as energetic and gentle and pleasant as him. Someone who always dragged others along. It was no wonder Maika was attracted to him. I understood her all too well...

"...What am I thinking?"

I shook my head, realizing how tired I was. I had no longer enough strength left to control my feelings.

"I should sleep..."

Staggering towards the bed, I couldn't muster up enough strength to climb up the ladder. My eyes fixated on the bottom bunk. Ash's bed. It felt as if his warmth was still lingering in the sheets... But I caught myself before touching them.

"Ah... What am I doing?"

I pretended to be a boy, but inside I was still a well-mannered girl. Especially in regards to Ash, I didn't want to drop the act even when he wasn't looking.

"Aren't you gonna sleep there?"

"Who's there?"

Suddenly, there was another voice in the room.

Turning around, I recognized Maika, who had just shut the door. "Just lie down," she said.

Maika's tired face showed a frail smile. She was not her usual self. I felt a cold presence around her, as if she were shrouded with clouds.

“There’s no way I can do that...”

“Why? Ash isn’t here.”

“Yeah... but still... it’s embarrassing...”

Although, as Arthur, it may not have been embarrassing...

I quickly shook my head at the passing thought. Whether I was a girl or a boy, I still needed his permission. I almost gave in to the temptation of Ash’s bed. I needed to control myself.

“Is that so? Well, I’ll be using it then.”

Her words came out faster than a flash and, before I realized it, she jumped onto Ash’s bed. *Wait!* Seeing her outrageous behavior, my ears turned red.

“W-What are you doing?”

How disgraceful of her. Admittedly, I was a little jealous. It looked very warm.

“Stupid Ash...”

Nevertheless, Maika’s voice was not warm at all. She was lying face down with her face buried in the pillow. Her small shoulders were shaking. I didn’t know what to say. She had appeared so courageous and yet she had been full of worries. Undoubtedly, she had reached her limit. All the suppressed emotions flowed out after coming here.

Seeing her crying while holding Ash’s pillow, I felt like I wanted to join in. I wanted to be honest with my feelings and cry... But I had to show restraint. If I let it out now, it was no longer going to be possible to uphold my lie. Ash was only my friend. It would have been weird to cry side by side with Maika, who considered him much more than that.

“Arthur...”

As I was lost in my thoughts, Maika called out to me. Her head was still buried in the pillow, but her hand reached out towards me.

“What is it, Maika?”

Did she want me to take her hand? As I stretched out my hand, she clutched it.

“Huh?”

In a matter of seconds, she grabbed not just my hand, but also my collar, dragging me on the bed. Before I knew it, I was lying on Ash’s bed, looking up at Maika.

“What’s... happening...?”

Not fully realizing what had happened, I stared into Maika’s tear-filled eyes. The sensation of her tears falling down onto my cheeks was warm.

“...M-Maika?”

“You know...” Noticing my bewilderment, Maika softened her voice. “I really hate people who lie and suppress their feelings.”

Her words pierced straight through my heart.

I tried to deny her statement, but the lie got stuck in my throat. It was as if cold blood had spouted out from my broken heart and accumulated all the way from my stomach up to my mouth. I felt like I was drowning inside my freezing blood. I couldn’t bring myself to say anything. My body remembered the cold and started shivering.

“You’re in pain. You want to cry. You want someone to help you. And yet you can’t bring yourself to do any of it. I hate the look of resignation on your face.”

As I was drowning, her tears came falling down upon me.

“I really hate it. It’s okay to cry... I just... I just can’t hold it in anymore... Just let me cry...”

Listening to her speak, it sounded more like an excuse for herself to cry than she was genuinely mad at me. I felt the bleeding inside of me stop, and put on a comforting expression.

“There you go again, making that face!” Maika scolded me. “Hasn’t Ash made you smile? Time and time again? And you’re still holding in your tears while putting on that fake smile!”

Maika hugged me while sobbing. Was it possible that she had come to comfort me? Even though she was hurting this much herself? She was a saint. I felt her warm cheek touch against mine. *Let it all out, Maika.*

It was good that Ash—or for that matter anyone else—wasn't here to see her like this. Her face was drenched in tears and her eyes were bright red. She cried so much—it was almost as if she was crying for two people. But her tears were warm. Just as warm as Ash's smile.





The wind was blowing in from the window. Summer was almost over, but this was a textbook summer breeze. With a sense of accomplishment, I idly enjoyed the refreshing breeze. I had just seen a great dream. I had secured victory over my long-standing rival, the Grim Reaper, via pinfall after a German suplex. After both of us had secured a victory in previous encounters, this was the deciding match. It was a magnificent showdown, packed with dramatic developments and surrounded by a cheering crowd. Lady Maika and Lord Arthur's screams when I was down on the ground were almost lifelike. Since I had emerged as the hard-fought winner in the end, I felt like basking in the glory even after waking up from the dream.

However, where exactly was I? This was not my dormitory room. I was surrounded by unfamiliar and extravagant furniture. The garden outside the window gave me a strange sense of *déjà vu*. Sitting up in bed, I noticed my upper body was wrapped in bandages. It looked like I was two or three steps away from being turned into a mummy. But this was to be expected considering Sir Werewolf's fangs and claws had hurt my left shoulder and right wrist. My memories appeared clearer than they were after the encounter with Sir Bear. At the very least I remembered getting hurt and fainting afterwards. So, this must have been a private room reserved for medical treatment. I wondered how many days I had slept. Lady Maika and the others must have been sick with worry. I needed to let someone know that I had regained consciousness. Was anyone here?

"Hello? Is someone outside?"

My wounds hurt a little as I yelled out, especially my left shoulder. Also, my stomach felt empty. Very empty. I was starving. How long had I not eaten?

"Hello?"

I needed food. Meat, if possible. My body needed protein to recover from the loss of blood and flesh.

"Is anyone there?"

No one replied. Where was everyone? I started to lose hope. Just calling out

for someone had already used up all my strength. Maybe this was the end of the line. *Someone please listen to my last words.*

“I want meat, please!”

The door opened. Lord Arthur and Lady Maika, who was carrying nursing supplies, peeked into the room. It was a miracle. My words had reached someone. Instinctively, I felt gratitude towards the gods. I welled up with tears of joy.

“I want to eat meat.”

I was convinced that these two kind souls were going to prepare it for me right away, but they looked as if their expectations and hopes had been betrayed. Their kind expressions said, “This is not the reaction we expected.”

Regardless, while their expectations had been destroyed, they did bring me a meal right away. I felt the joy of living again as I put the soft-boiled pork into my mouth.

“So good!”

No doubt Chef Yacoo had prepared this meal. I tasted his careful and time-consuming approach. Although, even considering his skills, this meat tasted much better than usual.

“Are you sure it is okay for me to eat such exquisite food?”

At the same time, my hand just kept taking more and more food. It was too good. And I was too hungry.

“Chef Yacoo made it just for you, so I don’t see why there would be a problem. Besides, the farmers brought this meat as a token of gratitude for you.”

Lord Arthur pouted while I was happily chewing the delicious pork. The kind people who had brought me my meal were not able to hide their anger. It looked like there was a scolding waiting for me after the meal. Did I really have to listen to it? I tried to delay it a little bit longer by asking some questions.

“A token of gratitude?”

“Because you are the hero who subjugated the demon. Especially the people

outside the city wall feel indebted towards you.”

“I feel a bit guilty receiving something this delicious just for doing my job...”

By now I had almost officially become the adjutant apprentice of Sir George. As such, it was part of my regular duties to deal with a werewolf in such a case. I had some personal interests in play too, but since they did not deviate from my duties, there was no problem.

While I was thinking to myself, Lord Arthur smiled. “Ash, you really are...”

“Arthur! Don’t go soft on him now!” Lady Maika immediately reprimanded them.

“You’re right. I need to show I’m angry.”

“Exactly! If we just leave him be, he’s going to keep being reckless!”

Personally, I would have preferred if they went soft on me. I did have a reasonable excuse after all. Just like I did for fighting Sir Bear.

“You both are quite harsh. I did not intend to do something reckless, so even if you leave me alone, there will not be any more problems.”

In response to my perfectly reasonable statement, they both gave me a fierce glare.

“See. No introspection at all. Even though he got hurt this badly and made us all sick with worry, he doesn’t regret anything!”

“Yeah, I get it now. I can’t go soft on him anymore. Ash, you need to change your way of thinking.”

Change my way of thinking? Now you’re being unreasonable! Besides, I already changed my body when I was reincarnated, isn’t that impressive enough?

“I really did not intend to hurt myself.”

“That would have made us even angrier! Here, eat up.”

As I sighed, Lady Maika held out a fork with a piece of meat. I happily obliged.

“How is it?”

“It is great!”

Seeing my smile, her expression loosened up a bit.

“Maika, now you’re being too soft!” Lord Arthur protested.

“I’m not! Not at all!”

“You’re smiling! Okay then, I’ll have to do it myself.”

Lady Maika looked unhappy with Lord Arthur’s proposal, but she seemed to be aware of her facial expression slipping up, so she reluctantly handed over the fork and dish. It was Lord Arthur’s turn to feed me.

“Here you go, Ash!”

“Mmh...”

“How is it?”

“It is great!”

Lord Arthur also started to lighten up seeing my smile.

“Arthur... your face...”

“What? Am I smiling?” Flustered, they patted their cheeks. The more they checked their face, the redder it became. “I-I’m sorry. It’s just that, when I realized that I’m taking care of Ash, I couldn’t help but smile.”

“I get it. I feel the same. Usually Ash is so self-reliant, so this feels like a special service.”

Am I supposed to say, “Sorry for burdening you”? And what do you mean by “special service”? They both were in complete agreement, but I had no idea what was going on.

Wait a minute...

“If it only applies when I am injured, that means that it is a scarce opportunity, only available for a limited time, and therefore the value goes up, right?”

Hearing me mumble to myself, both of them barked at me at the same time. “He’s not sorry at all!”

Why are you angry at me for that? In the end, any resistance was futile, and I was knocked out by their tag-team scolding.

Maika's Perspective

I had been too naive. I was not strong enough. I had believed that I could help out Ash. In fact, he did rely on me more often these days. Compared to our first study group at the church in Noscula, I had grown immensely. Nevertheless, once again Ash had been on the verge of death. I was unable to help him at all, making it clear that I still had a long way to go. I needed to become stronger. Much, much stronger. I had to change my strategy if I wanted to get anywhere. No matter how good I was at sword fighting, it was useless in the case of Ash being attacked by a werewolf while going off on his own. And he acted on his own a lot. It was not possible for me to watch over him on my own. I needed partners; people who looked out for Ash and stopped him from doing anything dangerous or got rid of the danger before him.

My train of thought made me come to a realization. I finally understood why Ash was concerned about the students in the study group. He was thinking the same. He didn't have enough strength to do everything on his own, so he decided to join forces with others. Ash was amazing after all. He was always a step ahead of me. Walking in front of me, he lit up the way for me. It was a bit frustrating. I did not think I could have liked him even more. However, I didn't intend on walking behind him forever. Someday I wanted to catch up and walk beside him. For that I needed to run at full speed on the path that he had illuminated for me. Arthur appeared in that same way in front of me.

"Arthur, let's help Ash."

"Of course! I don't know what you're talking about, but I will cooperate!"

I had expected nothing less than an immediate response from Arthur. I didn't need any preamble to convince him.

"Did something happen to Ash?"

"Not at the moment, but I'm sure something will happen in the future."

Arthur eagerly agreed. "Okay, got you. It really is bad for the heart to see Ash

behaving recklessly time and time again. Basically, it's not so much about helping him when he's in trouble, but rather to plan ahead so as to avoid trouble as much as possible, right? Hopefully nothing will happen, but that's not realistic."

"That was a perfect explanation."

"Not at all. But it's going to be difficult. Ash won't listen to us and it's hard to predict his actions."

Arthur was quick to understand. I was glad I talked to him first.

"Yeah, that's the problem. I thought about what we should do first and I came to the conclusion that we need more people who help us."

"I see. Let me think about it for a moment."

Arthur sat down in his chair and gestured for me to sit down in Ash's chair. We were in their shared room. I politely refused Arthur's suggestion and sat down on Ash's bed. *Hehe, Ash's bed*. But since Ash was sleeping at the mansion to treat his wounds, it no longer smelled like him.

While I sulked, Arthur glared at me with reproachful eyes.

"Do you want to sit next to me, Arthur?"

"You're a girl! As a boy, I shouldn't get too close!"

"I don't mind. But I can't force you if you don't want to. So, what do you think we should do about Ash?"

"I wasn't finished yet with our previous topic..."

Arthur let out a dissatisfied sigh and got ready to move on. His eyes still looked reproachful, but he was willing to let it slide for Ash's sake.

"Let's see... There are already some people in the city who will look out for Ash without us saying anything, right?"

"Of course. We're talking about Ash after all."

Once Ash talked to someone with all his heart, that person was sure to become a comrade.

"So, for a start, we've got Rihn and Yae as well as George and all his

subordinates. Then there's also Yacoo and Quid, of course. And the prisoners would probably help too."

"Thinking about it now, there are a lot of influential people among them. Not to forget Reina too. Someone as caring as her wouldn't be able to ignore someone like Ash under normal circumstances, let alone now that they've become friends."

Arthur showed a pitiful smile. "That leaves us with the members of the study group at the academy. It seems like it would be easy to get them to cooperate. They are amicable towards Ash, right?"

"Yeah, they think highly of him. I've provided them with several snacks and desserts in Ash's name!"

"Then, one of our goals should be to enlist members of the study group."

"That should be possible if we just keep on going with the study group like usual."

That was my thought, but it appeared that Arthur wanted to be more proactive. "That's not bad, but maybe we should focus on the most talented students."

"Oh, right. Like Glen and Hermes?"

Just like me, Glen didn't like studying very much, but he was serious about his fighting skills. Hermes was not very talkative, but studious and fast at math. They were the first two that came to my mind after hearing Arthur's suggestion.

"Yeah, they both stand out. I was also thinking about Saias, Kei, and Horus. Each one of them has their own talent, so it should be interesting to get them on board."

"You're very observant," I remarked.

"I'm just focusing on details while you are looking at the whole picture. And some of it is due to my upbringing, I guess."

Arthur showed his fake smile, signaling that he was suppressing something. It appeared that he noticed it himself after seeing me twist my lips. He awkwardly put a hand on his cheek.

“I’m sorry. Was I doing the fake smile that you hate again?”

“Yes.”

“You really are frank...”

I hated fake smiles. And I was not going to shy away from making myself clear. Besides, it was also better for Arthur’s sake.

After staring at him for a while, he had to admit defeat. “I just remembered something unpleasant. But I guess it’s not all bad if it helps Ash in the end. I didn’t mean to actively put on a fake smile.”

But you still did it. I wondered how one could have so much self-restraint. Some people might have called it a strength, but it was a scary one. It was prone to come apart in a matter of seconds. I also needed to pay attention to Arthur. After all, he was my closest ally in this plan to help Ash. I decided to ask Ash for advice regarding Arthur. I had a feeling that was going to be enough to solve the problem. But anyway, that was for a later date. For now, I had to focus on enlisting collaborators for our “Ash Alliance.” That name was pretty catchy, right?

“So, should we focus on the members of our study group?” I asked to confirm.

“Yeah, that’s one of the immediate possibilities. But there is one other person whom you could enlist.”

Who else was there? As I tilted my head to the side, Arthur strangely shuddered.

“My dear brother Itsuki loves you very much, doesn’t he?”

“My uncle!”

That was such a good idea that I reflexively clapped my hands. My uncle was the acting count and apparently a very important person. I didn’t know how important, but there was no doubt that it would be great to have him on our side.

“He is no longer as busy as before, and I’m sure he would love to see you. You should go and visit him.” Arthur went on to add something even more

important. “Do you remember what you told Sir George when you barged in on Ash’s treatment? You said that you love Ash.”

Generally speaking, a confession of one’s love was an extremely serious matter for a person of noble heritage. It was commonly referred to as “the howling of the three gods.” There was the howling of support from the monkey god, the deity of harmony, which helped the confession go over smoothly. Next, there was the howling of good fortune from the wolf god, which bestowed a blessing upon the new household after a successful confession. Finally, there was the howling of caution from the dragon god, which prepared you to go to war if anyone was to interfere with the marriage. My mom had told me with a smile that among the upper class the question of who married whom often led to pools of blood.

“In his position, Sir George will probably feel obliged to report this to my dear brother Itsuki, so you will have to talk things out with him.”

“Really? Did I say that?”

I wondered if Ash had heard me. He was unconscious, so probably not, but who knows... No, he behaved normally after waking up, so it was probably fine. Not that there was anything wrong with him knowing. I wanted him to know! But I didn’t know what he was going to say in response. While I didn’t intend on letting him get away, I was a bit worried that he would somehow manage to run off.

“Maika, your face is bright red. Take a deep breath.”

“I’m fine! Really!”

“You don’t look fine. Do you think you’ll be able to tell my dear brother Itsuki how you feel about Ash?”

Of course! That was just a chat over tea compared to confessing to Ash. The real showdown was to confess my feelings directly to Ash himself. Telling my uncle “I like Ash” was like a mere training match with a wooden sword. Or rather like practicing my swings by myself.

As my thoughts shifted from Ash to my uncle, I calmed down. I realized that it was near impossible for Ash to have heard my confession in his state. My face

no longer felt flushed. As always, Ash was very addictive.

After calming down, I was able to hear Arthur sigh. “I think I now understand why you acted that way back then. It seems like you’ll be fine talking to my dear brother Itsuki. I feel pity for him, but I get it.”

You get it too? I expected nothing less from a trusted member of the Ash Alliance.

Finally, I ended up in front of my uncle’s office. When I asked the servant if I could meet with my uncle Lord Itsuki, he came back in such a short amount of time that it must have taken my uncle less than five seconds to reply. His answer was “Let’s have some tea in my office!”.

“Sorry to bother you, dear uncle.”

“Haha, you could never bother me!”

“Don’t you have work?”

“Oh, I don’t think of you as interfering with my work—it’s rather the other way around.”

I didn’t mind his statement since it showed his affection, but the maid who was pouring the tea glared at my uncle. He must have felt her piercing death stare, since he felt the need to expand upon his words.

“Of course, talking about your position is also part of my job. You might not carry the name of Amanobe and Sacula at the moment, but it is unclear what the future holds. This is an important task as the next head of the Amanobe family.”

It dawned upon the maid that he was right, but her eyes still scolded him. This was a textbook example of hiding your true motives behind your stated reasons. Ash was great at that. My uncle not so much.

In any case, my name was related to my social standing. Currently, I was “Maika Noscula,” since I was the daughter of Noscula village’s chief, Klein. My mom used to be called “Yuika Amanobe Sacula.” Back then, she was part of the Amanobe family, and it was her birthright to become the next count of the

Sacula region. However, now she was “Yuika Noscula,” and no longer held that right. Regardless, as long as the Count of Sacula agreed, as a blood relative it was still possible for me to retrieve the name of Sacula and become the next in line.

“What do you think, Maika? Have you considered it?”

His expression had become as serious as the first time we had met. The atmosphere felt tense, like when my dad drew his real sword in front of me.

“I want you to seriously think about it,” he added.

In other words, he offered me to become the successor to the title of Count of the Sacula region. Of course, this also implied that I probably would have to study even harder in the future.

“It’s not like I haven’t considered it at all.”

My mom had talked to me about it before leaving the village. She said, “Be prepared for them to ask you if you want to inherit the Sacula name.” According to her, “Itsuki is desperate to find a successor, since he doesn’t have any children. And you hold a promising future after your training with Ash.” *Hehe, I’m Ash’s first disciple.* She then had continued, saying, “If you decide to inherit the title of count, you will become very powerful. However, you can’t do everything with that power. I used to be the next in line, but I decided to renounce the name of ‘Sacula’ so I could pursue what I really wanted.” She concluded by saying that I should carefully consider my options and do what I want for myself. She had promised that she was going to support me no matter what. And in that case, I already knew what my answer was. My mom had probably known too, that was why she had told me to do what I wanted.

“The most important thing for me is to become Ash’s wife. So ultimately, whether I will become ‘Maika Amanobe Sacula’ or not will depend on Ash.”

If it made Ash happy, I wouldn’t have minded becoming a count. That was all the title meant to me. I realized that social standing and honor were considered to be important, but as long as I could support and help Ash, I would have been satisfied. I had felt that way ever since I had seen his sun-like smile on that fateful day. Happiness and fulfillment all lay within his gaze. That was why I loved Ash.

“Hm... Ash...”

My uncle looked sullen, as if he stood in front of a dark way without any lights.

“I have not interacted with him enough to truly judge his character... But looking at his academy reports, the exemplary agricultural improvement plan, and his fight against the werewolf the other day, I must admit that he is an impressive young man. He seems to have a good reputation too.”

Right, right! It felt great to hear him praise the person I loved. I couldn't stop grinning.

“Nevertheless, it is too early to say whether Ash would be a suitable candidate to stand by your side if you became count.”

What?

“Personally, I don't mind that he was born a farmer, but surely there will be criticism from others. In that regard, he will have to build an outstanding track record to prove himself. I will have to observe him from now on.”

I didn't understand what he was going on about. I think we were talking past each other.

“Uhm... My dear uncle, we should probably talk again after you get to know Ash better.”

He looked puzzled upon hearing my statement. Arthur and Reina would have agreed with me if they had been here.

“The problem is not whether Ash will be a good match for me.”

My mom was also in agreement about this.

“It's whether I will be a good match for him.”

Even if I turned from “Maika Noscula” into “Maika Amanobe Sacula.” *If that were all it took for Ash to notice me, I wouldn't have been this hard at work.*

“Ash isn't going to stand by my side! I will be standing by Ash's side! Don't get it wrong! It's great that you approved our agricultural improvement plan straight away, but if you're going to hesitate in regard to all the future projects

that Ash will submit, I have no idea what he's going to do! He might end up leaving Sacula or maybe even destroying it!"

"...Destroying it?"

It was vexing to hear my uncle murmur these words with such a puzzled look and such a wrong intonation.

Yes, Ash might indeed have been capable of destroying a city. Just think about Noscula village. Before Ash got going, there was not a single child studying at the church, there was no honey and no medicine. He had even introduced a new method for fieldwork. He had turned the village upside down (albeit in a good way)! Having observed Ash diligently moving around, I had realized that he wanted to reproduce that on a larger scale. Together with his signature smile! How wonderful! And of course, I was going to support him with all my might!

"Wait. If Ash wants to reproduce what he did in Noscula village on a larger scale, wouldn't it be more beneficial for him if I became count?" I thought out loud.

As a count, I would hold more power than a village chief. At the very least I would be able to approve of his projects right away. Before making the fertilizer, Ash had mentioned himself that laying the groundwork was a lot more troublesome than it had been at the village. I wondered what Ash would say if I told him he could do whatever he wanted once I became count. I could already see him rejoicing.

Contemplating my possible future, I looked at my uncle, the next in line and current acting count. "Maybe I will become count after all."

"Oh? I'm happy to hear that as a member of the Amanobe family! But at the same time, it's also giving me the shivers for some reason..."

Don't worry, Uncle. I'm not going to swing my sword. You're not in Ash's way after all, so you're safe. At least for now.

Out of the blue, I remembered what my mom once told me: "You have to make sure that Ash can run towards his goals." Her words were shining at the back of my mind, showing me the way. I was going to protect Ash's back while

pushing him along. At that moment, I finally felt like I could truly become that person.

A Certain Compiler's Afterword

Thank you so much for taking this book into your hands. Thanks to everyone who bought the first volume compiled of the original text from Ash's point of view and the perspectives of other characters, we were able to bring you this second compilation. I hope you enjoyed this one just as much.

Once again, there are so many people who helped make this publication possible. The illustrator, the proofreaders, the binders, the printing staff, and all the other specialists whom I forgot to mention. Also the editor who helped me organize the text. I can't thank all of you enough. This book would not have been possible without you.

Just like last time, I decided to celebrate the publication of the second volume by visiting the location of Ash's activities. This time it has brought me to Itsutsu city in the Sacula region. You can still see Ash's influence in a lot of places here, so it's difficult to choose where to start...

First, let's take a look at the dormitory! Currently, it is used as an archive alongside the administrative hall and the main mansion. Some parts have been restored by modern technology, but others remain intact as they were. Ash and Arthur's shared room has been recreated with a two-story bed and desk like the ones they used. I wonder how many evenings they spent chatting away there. I imagine they had warm exchanges, with one of them getting all fired up...

There is a nice smell floating from the cafeteria where Maika begged Ash for a Hamburg steak. A cook who carries the torch of the long-standing shop "Cinnamon" is running a café restaurant in that same place now. After giving me permission to enter the kitchen, he explained that "This has always been a school cafeteria" while talking about the history of the buildings before they turned into archives. (It should be said that he is a much calmer person than the famous former owner).

Apparently, the dormitory had always been used as an educational facility. The chef then boasted that this cafeteria had continued to fill up the stomachs

of bright, young students up to this day. Nowadays, it is used by university students doing research at the archives. A part-time student worker, who was doing the dishes in the kitchen, added with a smile that “It’s popular because of the student discount.”

Of course, the archive is not just known for its food (although it is delicious). It is a haven for fans of the well-known figure and researchers of that time period. I wonder how many documents have been authenticated through comparison with the handwritten notes stored here. Above anything, this is the place where Ash’s name was first written down on an official document. I’m talking about the name register for the count’s army academy. The old piece of paper is kept inside a special showcase. The entry simply reads, “Ash — from Noscula village.” Back then, he really was only “Ash.”

By the way, his name is preceded by a set of slightly round letters reading “Maika Noscula.” It almost feels as if I can see a very young Ash and Maika stand in the room. Alongside Arthur, Reina, Glen, Hermes, and everyone else.

—From the former dormitory surrounded by the echoes of laughter past and present.



"This is amazing!!"

"Delicious, right?"

"Yeah, I like it. I feel like the gentle sweetness of the honey calms me down."

« REINA »

« MAIKA »

« ARTHUR »



“What are
you doing?!
Tomatoes are
poisonous!”

“What do
you mean?
We’ve been eating
them every summer
back at the village.
We’ve never had
any trouble.”

《《 ASH 》》

Bonus Short Stories

Yae's Light

"Are you sure you cannot make an exception for my burning desire?"

I was dazzled by his desperate pleading. The boy in front of me was Ash. He was younger than me, but his upturned eyes carried a destructive power. Maybe it was because he looked so much like Sir George, but I almost found myself giving in. *I need to get a hold of myself.* I was a priest sworn to guard and propagate the wisdom of the three gods. No matter how passionate the plea, I had to follow the rules.

"Ash, please stop insisting. I can't make any exceptions."

"No matter what?"

"Yes."

After being let down repeatedly, Ash gave a disappointed smile. An outsider could have easily misunderstood the situation, but he was begging for access to the temple's library.

"Understood. It is not my intention to bother you in any way. I will leave it at that."

"I appreciate your understanding. I'm sure that you will be granted access eventually if you keep accumulating achievements. But please, wait until then."

Ash nodded obediently. Then, the understanding boy suddenly changed the topic. "By the way, what do you like about Sir George?"

"Why are you asking about Sir George all of a sudden?! I mean, he is wonderful in every conceivable way but..."

Oh dear. That was so sudden that I ended up giving an awkward answer.

As I pondered my blunder with a stiff expression on my face, Ash smiled brightly. "I agree, Sir George is indeed a wonderful person. He is as strong as the

wolf god, as wise as the monkey god, and as fierce as the dragon god. You might even say he is *too* perfect.”

Yes! Yes! His only flaw was that he was too serious, but even his occasionally clumsy behavior was endearing.

By now I had gotten used to my role as a priest, but until recently I had been embarrassingly inexperienced. It was none other than Sir George who helped me and triggered my self-improvement. I was only able to be my current self due to the magnificent virtue of Sir George.

Ash frantically nodded. Naturally, someone as wise as Ash would have understood the splendor of Sir George.

Oh, and Sir George did have one other flaw. He was still not over his first love and was unable to make room for a new one. As a result, my feelings for him stayed unrequited. The prospects for a future together looked dim, but there was no way I’d be able to say any of this to Ash.

“He becomes even more perfect the more you learn about him!” the boy continued his praise.

“Exactly, you know what you’re talking about.”

“Yes. And if you will allow me to say so, you are just as wonderful.”

I felt my cheeks flush. As a priest and someone much older than him, his flattery shouldn’t have affected me this much, but I was overcome with emotion upon hearing Ash compare me to Sir George.

“No, I’m nowhere near Sir George...”

“Your modesty is yet another of your magnificent virtues. I am just objectively praising you as a student profiting from your help. Please accept my appreciation.”

I didn’t know what to say in response.

“You are very polite even to someone as young as me, and always deal with my extravagant requests right away. I cannot help but feel admiration for your passion and intelligence, seeing how you even helped us write up the proposal. And what more can I say about your appearance? All the men and women at

the academy admire you. One might even say that you, too, are too perfect.”

“Please, don’t tease me like that, Ash.”

“My apologies, that was not my intention.” Ash was thinking with a serious expression on his face. “However, I imagine that being as perfect as you are also comes with a lot of expectations from others.”

“Well, thank you for the compliments, but yeah, you’re right...”

He was right that anyone who ended up being in a relationship with me would have to be under constant scrutiny. After all, our future children would be heirs of the count.

While I was nowhere near the level of Lady Yuika, I was still considered a very talented woman and was constantly introduced to suitors from all over the place. However, since none of them lived up to Sir George in the slightest, I always swept them away. If Sir George were to ask for my hand in marriage, I would not let anyone interfere. I would personally make sure those who opposed us stayed quiet.

“I see, so there are political implications in regard to his marriage...” I murmured.

Ash just gently smiled after hearing my slip of the tongue. “Mother Yae, this might not be my place to interfere, but...” His expression resembled that of an executioner showing a last bout of mercy to the convict. “I think you and Sir George would be the perfect couple. I cannot see you with anyone else.”

“...Do you really think so?”

“Yes, I really, really think so. So much so that I am inclined to mention your name to Sir George whenever the chance arises.”

Are you really prepared to go that far for me?

As I stood in awe, Ash once again changed the subject. “So, there is really no way for me to borrow any books?”

“Ash, I’ve told you. I have to obey the rules.”

I was a priest who had sworn an oath to the three gods to guard their wisdom.

“...But I can lend you some books that I borrowed under my own name. That doesn’t go against the rules.”

But before that, I was a woman brimming with unrequited love. If there was a lamplight showing me the way towards its fulfillment, I was more than happy to fuel its fire.

Rihn’s Newfound Zeal

My name is Rihn and I’m a maid for the Count of Sacula.

I had proven myself worthy of all the lavish praise I had received by carrying out many tasks that were considered to be hellish. Regardless, even someone like me occasionally came across a job that was bound to end in failure.

I had been entrusted to take care of the count’s youngest child, who had just arrived from the capital. It sounded simple enough. However, it also entailed closely guarding a secret and preventing any enemies from snooping around.

In addition, the child in question, Lord Arthur, looked as if he had given up on himself. He was like an exhausted peasant wandering around in search of warmth after having been thrown out into the cold of winter. I feared that if anything upset the balance of his mind, Lord Arthur would cast down his eyes and give up on life completely. I had to watch out for threats from the inside and outside as well as for Lord Arthur himself. It was a nearly impossible challenge.

Nevertheless, even if I was prepared to fail, that didn’t mean that I had already given up. As the maid of the Count of Sacula, and even more so, as the mother of a little girl, I could not bear to see someone this young with an expression like that. I was going to accomplish the important task of protecting Lord Arthur even if it meant sacrificing myself.

Yes, that’s right—before the start of the new academic year at the military academy, I had been prepared to die. However, after it had started, I regretfully realized how unprepared I was. Those were my thoughts as I watched the usual four kids stealthily gathering in the garden of the dormitory.

“Mmmh...! So yummy.”

“So this is what it tastes like! Very delicious.”

“I can’t believe it tastes this good!”

Lady Maika, my daughter Reina, and Lord Arthur were chewing with sparkling eyes. All three of them had flushed cheeks as they voiced their excitement with a warm smile to the red-haired boy.

“Right? This is the true nature of the tomato!”

Ash’s voice revealed what they were eating. How preposterous! Tomatoes had not yet been certified as safe to eat. In order to fulfill my duty as the dormitory supervisor, I stepped forward into the garden with a stern expression.

“Ash, what are you doing out here?”

“We are practicing outdoors cooking by ourselves.”

While the other three were startled by my appearance, Ash stayed composed and replied with a smile. *He’s got some nerve.*

“Hm... Cooking practice, huh? What are you making?”

“We fried potatoes in pork fat and sprinkled them with cheese.”

I see. Then, what on earth is the red stuff around Lord Arthur’s mouth?

Before I could even pose that question, Ash, who had sensed my gaze, wiped off Lord Arthur’s mouth with his finger.

“What was that red stuff just now?” I asked.

“Red? We are only using potatoes, pork fat, and cheese; there should not be any red. It must have been an optical illusion,” Ash said with a puzzled expression.

Behind him, Lady Maika stuffed a round fruit into her mouth. Apparently, all of the red evidence had been destroyed.

He really did have a lot of nerve to come up with such an outrageous lie after breaking the rules right in front of me. I was the one person of whom even Lord Itsuki—and I say this with the utmost respect—was afraid.

Still, I was willing to make an exception and let it slide just this once. Besides,

Mother Yae had also told me that tomatoes were in fact not poisonous. And above anything, I was ready to overlook the situation in consideration of Lord Arthur, who looked very happy after having his mouth wiped by Ash. His face was bright red.

Ash really was something else, being able to change Lord Arthur's cold and stiff expression into a much warmer and relaxed one. That fact, however, created yet another worry for me. What I needed wasn't the resolution to sacrifice my own life, but rather the willpower to survive as long as possible and watch closely over these two, so that there was not going to be any trouble. I was the only one who could carry out such an important task.

"Oh, by the way, we were thinking about making crepes again, Mrs. Rihn. Are there any days that would not work for you?"

Yes, really! Only I!

Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Chapter 1: The Page Will Absorb Your Tears](#)

[Chapter 2: Paper Is Firewood for Words](#)

[Chapter 3: The Paper Plan](#)

[Chapter 4: Paper Is Mightier Than the Spear](#)

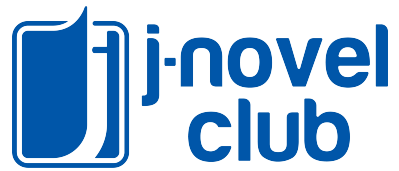
[A Certain Compiler's Afterword](#)

[Color Illustrations](#)

[Bonus Short Stories](#)

[About J-Novel Club](#)

[Copyright](#)



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Fushi no Kami: Rebuilding Civilization Starts With a Village Volume 2

by Mizuumi Amakawa

Translated by Maurice Alesch Edited by Eric Bravo Górriz

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Original Japanese edition published in 2020 by OVERLAP, Inc.

This English edition is published by arrangement with OVERLAP, Inc., Tokyo
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Ebook edition 1.0: January 2021